

Screen



French cinema since 1981:
Agnès Varda, *Beur cinema*,
Gérard Depardieu, *Cahiers*
***du cinéma*, Jack Lang.**

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foreword

Contemporary French cinema: dead or alive?

GINETTE VINCENDEAU

The situation for French cinema in the 1980s and early 1990s, especially seen from the UK, has never been more paradoxical. With works like *Jean de Florette*, *Nikita* or *Cyrano de Bergerac*, French films have come out of the art cinema ghetto and reached a wide popular audience, both in actual cinemas and on video. Video, in fact, is extending the audience for subtitled films with an unprecedented amount of material on first release or re-release in the past year. Though still under such labels as 'classic' or 'connoisseur', French movies, from *Belle de jour* to *Les Ripoux* (*Le Cop*) or *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf*, can be purchased at one's local megastore. From a pedagogic point of view, it is now possible to teach courses on French films which a new generation of students will have not only seen the first time round in the cinema, but also enjoyed as 'entertainment'. In France, film production has been maintained at a stable level (around 120 to 130 films a year), when it has pretty much collapsed in other European countries in the face of the multiple onslaught of Hollywood, 'global media' and (in central and Eastern Europe) sea-changes in political regimes. French stars can be worldwide celebrities, the auteur cinema is still producing controversial works (for example, *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf*, *La Belle Noiseuse*, *Les Nuits fauves*), indigenous comedies (like *Trois hommes et un couffin* or the recent *Les Visiteurs*) still take the home box office by storm, and dozens of French films are

remade in Hollywood, sometimes even before they have come out in France.

And yet, discourses about recent French cinema are overwhelmingly pessimistic. Cinema audiences are decreasing, and the trade is talking of a permanent state of 'crisis'. Though such talk has been a cliché in French trade journals since the 1920s, there is renewed cause for concern with the return of the Right to power, which may signal a decrease in state aid, and the imminent Gatt agreements which may swamp French screens with yet more movies. Critics and historians – especially from Anglo-American points of view – regard French films as in a state of aesthetic decline as well as of political irrelevancy. From this perspective, French cinema, it seems, only churns out nostalgic heritage blockbusters (tainted, moreover, with the brush of state-financed 'official art'), sleek Americanized thrillers, or self-indulgent tales of existential despair by male auteurs, featuring exquisite young heroines.

The purpose of assembling articles on contemporary French cinema (which can usefully be dated from 1981, the inception of the Socialist government), is to begin to map out the economic, cultural, ideological and aesthetic debates that crisscross this very contradictory field. As Susan Hayward points out in her essay on Jack Lang's policies (the Socialist Minister for Culture responsible for the cinema until April 1993), although the difficulties of auteur cinema are very real, there may well be a case of '1960s nostalgia' at work in the constant harking back to the new wave for a model; a point echoed in a different way in Robert Lang's interview with Fereydoun Hoveyda, a former *Cahiers du cinéma* critic. And although on the surface one could accuse present-day *Cahiers* of such a nostalgic return to the auteur, Chris Darke shows in his analysis of the output of the journal since the early 1980s that auteur debates within *Cahiers* have significantly shifted to new questions of the ontology of the cinematic image, in the face of 'contamination' by other media. If star *Cahiers* writers like Serge Daney are just beginning to be translated into English, there is a wealth of critical material, from *Cahiers* and other sources, which has not yet been exported. One reason for this lack of exportability may well be the perceived 'loss of ideology' which informs the post-1970s French film scene, both in the films themselves and in critical discourses. Yet, as Sandy Flitterman-Lewis and Carrie Tarr demonstrate in very different contexts, this is a superficial view, partly the result of the lack of film availability, despite the greater presence of French material mentioned above. Flitterman-Lewis analyses two recent films directed by Agnès Varda (*Kung-Fu Master* and *Jane B. by Agnès V.*) which have hardly been seen outside the international festival circuit, and yet which show Varda's continuing concern with a

politics as well as an aesthetics of the representation of women and women's desires. Tarr argues that, albeit in a limited corpus of films and in politically ambiguous ways, questions of racial, ethnic and national identity are explored in the Beur films made by second-generation North African immigrants; films which importantly reached quite a wide audience in France, though not outside, where *Le Thé au harem d'Archimède* is the only one available, in the UK at least.

Although there are still successful popular genre films made in France for domestic consumption (such as *Les Visiteurs*), the narrowing audience base and the renewed need to reach outside the home market have meant important shifts in budgets, narratives and genres. This is evidenced by youth-oriented films such as *Diva*, *37°2 le matin* (*Betty Blue*) and *Nikita* (the so-called *cinéma du look* not covered in this issue, partly because it has already been abundantly commented on). It is also illustrated by the increasing popularity of the heritage film, with consequences for stardom, for instance, well understood by a figure such as Gérard Depardieu who, from a background of indigenous comedy and the more prestigious auteur cinema, is now actively sustaining the heritage movie both in and out of France.

Films are still an absolutely vital part of French culture (both learned and popular), and in more ways than are known outside France's borders. While we cannot predict the future of French cinema, we can at least try to ensure that the existing wealth of material is better known and better understood.

Magic and wisdom in two portraits by Agnès Varda: *Kung-Fu Master* and *Jane B. by Agnès V.*

SANDY FLITTERMAN-LEWIS

1 For an extensive discussion of Varda and her work, see my book *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), where I discuss all of Varda's films up to and including *Vagabond*. For the present article, I would like to thank Ginette Vincendeau and Joel Lewis for a number of helpful suggestions.

Long considered an exemplar both of the French new wave and of feminist filmmaking, Agnès Varda has consistently blended the dual concerns of film language and feminism in a commitment to explorations of the female cinematic voice (*filmer en femme*)¹, a commitment that has produced an inventive, collage-type signature form for Varda and a continuing challenge to conventional structures of spectatorship for her viewers. Yet Varda's career has been marked by a curious and often frustrating dialectic, in which some of her films have found great commercial and critical success (and therefore popularity) while others are literally ignored by the public (and thus lack distribution or widespread circulation). This rollercoaster visibility seems to have been the case with the two films under discussion here, for after the huge success and critical acclaim of *Sans toit ni loi/Vagabond* (1985), Varda has returned to relative obscurity, making it almost impossible for US and British audiences to see both *Kung-Fu Master* and *Jane B. by Agnès V.* Perhaps because of its more sensational premiss, *Kung-Fu Master* is available on subtitled video as *Le Petit amour*, but the more complex and interesting *Jane B.* does not exist in a subtitled video version and the film itself is rarely screened. Given that the high quality of Varda's work is fairly consistent, this pattern of visibility for some films and invisibility for others is extremely counterproductive.

2 Agnès Varda, Film Notes, *Perspectives on French Cinema*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, April 1988.

3 Agnès Varda, personal conversation, 1989.

Bertolt Brecht used to say that his plays divided the audience along class lines, this division demonstrating the class nature of identification and producing class consciousness in the theatre. Varda's films can be said to take this in another direction, for they are capable of being read in either a positive or negative light, depending on where one stands with respect to feminism (or feminist cinematic strategies). Keeping this in mind, what are we to make of a film that neither advocates nor denigrates – but simply presents – the desire of a woman of thirty-nine for a fourteen-year-old boy who loves videogames, and one game in particular? *Kung-Fu Master* (released in 1987) stars Jane Birkin as the former and Varda's own son Mathieu as the latter, and proceeds, in the course of its eighty minutes, to explore the nature of passion: the woman's for the boy, the boy's for the game. But provocative as the situation can be, and compelling as its narrative certainly is, the film, in fact, is only one half of what Varda calls *Birkin Double Jeu Varda I et II/A Diptych Dedicated to Jane Birkin I and II*. The first half of this duo is a ninety-seven-minute film entitled *Jane B. par Agnès V./Jane B. by Agnès V.* (1986) and it explores other passions – the passion for representation of an actress and a director, in other words, the passion for female authorship. It is, in Varda's words, a 'cinematic collage of fictitious scenes set in different seasons with a shot of mythology'.² *Kung-Fu Master* emerged from, or was born in, the first film: during the shooting of *Jane B.*, Birkin gave Varda a ten-page character sketch she had written, which Varda then expanded into a feature-length fiction film, naming it for the eponymous game. Essay form and fiction thus merge and yet remain distinct in these two very different films which, discrete as they are, must be seen in tandem to be fully appreciated.

From her very first feature film in 1954, *La Pointe-Courte* (about a couple's troubled relationship against the backdrop of fishermen's labour concerns), through her more explicitly 'feminist' work of the subsequent four decades, Varda has posed the question of feminine identity across a field of cinematic explorations. Each film can be seen as a kind of discursive laboratory in which female 'characters' – both fictional and actual – self-reflexively examine their lives and their dreams while Varda investigates the production of cinematic meaning. The 'Birkin Diptych' is no less a part of this tradition: a 'field of reflections and reveries'³ that invites the spectator to pursue, along with Varda, the same questions that the women represent on the screen. The demands these films make of us are also the demands they make of themselves. And as each film in the diptych responds to its 'other', the dual traditions of Varda's oeuvre braid, weave and intertwine into a single productive

dialogue, the paired concerns that have for the most part traversed her career in individual films. Thus the narrative fictions of *Cléo de 5 à 7*/*Cléo from 5 to 7* (1961), *Le Bonheur*/*Happiness* (1965), and *L'Une chante, l'autre pas* /*One Sings, the Other Doesn't* (1977), to name but a few, can be contrasted to the 'poetic essay' cinematic form elaborated by Varda with *L'Opéra-Mouffe* (1958), *Daguerréotypes* (1975), and *Ulysse* (1982), among others. The fiction films tend to hold their focus on the preoccupations of a central female character; the poetic essays can be said to broaden the view into processes of cultural signification. It is part of the diptych's singular accomplishment and suggestive power that it can maintain the integrity of each cinematic form while relying on their blending to ultimately produce the meanings of both.

Here in the diptych one can see the self-contained and often perplexing fiction of *Kung-Fu Master* suddenly gain a theoretical dimension when considered in the light of the authorial issues posed by *Jane B.* In *Kung-Fu*, Mary-Jane (Jane Birkin), the mother of a teenage girl (Birkin's daughter, Charlotte Gainsbourg) thinks about turning forty, falls in love with a teenage boy, and considers, among other things, taking a romantic holiday with him; in *Jane B.*, Jane Birkin, the actress, thinks about turning forty, meets with Agnès Varda the filmmaker, and considers, among other things, a collaborative project. Both films have desire as their central motivating force, desire that is posed simultaneously as a series of questions, unresolvable contradictions and sustaining relationships (primarily among women). Whether the object of desire is understood literally, as with the boy in *Kung-Fu Master*, or figuratively, as with the generalized impulse to create in *Jane B.*, the endless pursuit that characterizes desire as a psychic process is dramatized in the movement of both films. In the former film it is the restless ambivalence of its heroine that corresponds to what we are most familiar with as longing; in the latter, the protean transformations of mini-narratives adopted and exchanged convey the sense of perpetual movement, as fantasy moulds itself into various fictions. In either case desire is figured in a number of evolving discursive relays, but while the first film renders Jane in dialogue with herself, the second puts her in a state of constant dialogue with Varda.

Both films, in fact, can be understood as *portraits*, and as such they demonstrate two distinct strategies that Varda employs to elaborate issues of feminine identity. In the chiasmic structure formed by the two films – the imaginary portrait of a real person and the real portrait of an imaginary person – what emerges is a notion of the portrait as a 'matrix of dreams and associations'⁴ in which fantasy and desire are as much a part of the 'person' as

4 Agnès Varda, 'Autour d'Agnès Varda: films et cinécriture', International Colloquium on Twentieth Century French Studies, University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado, March 1993.

has said that her overriding question was 'Is there a way to describe or invent Jane Birkin?'⁵ And in a curious way, this is only partially answered by that film alone. *Kung-Fu*, for all of its signifiers of fictionality, has as much to contribute to that response as the film which bears the actress's name. Even though *Kung-Fu* was made after *Jane B.* and in many ways stands on its own as a commercial release (in 1988 Varda chose to seek US distribution for it over its companion piece because she thought it was more 'accessible', and therefore more likely to attract large audiences), my discussion will turn first to this fiction before exploring the theoretical and cinematic issues that gave rise to it. In *Kung-Fu*, Mary-Jane is a fictional character who, much like Juliette Janson (Marina Vlady) in Godard's *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle/Two or three things I know about her* (1966), intimately resembles the actress who plays her. But whereas Godard chooses to open his film with a reflexive discourse in voice over about the dialectics between fictional character and performing actress, Varda reserves her own voice over for the other film, choosing instead to plunge into the immediacy of the fictional world by giving the voice over to Mary-Jane. Here, as the film opens, Mary-Jane wonders about her teenage daughter's initiation into love life, and thus introduces her own obsessive pursuit with the generational considerations that will come to haunt her. In this way, as with the other films in Varda's tradition of fictional portraiture (*Cléo*, *Sans toit ni loi*), we learn about female subjectivity and desire – along with their social inscription – through the conflicts and concerns of an exemplary female character. Varda's fictions *demonstrate*, and in so doing, constitute her heroines as simultaneously subject and object of the desiring gaze.

It is, in fact, in the register of 'looking' that desire is first posited in *Kung-Fu Master*. After a brilliantly playful introductory sequence in which the teenaged Julien (attired in karate garb and filmed in speeded-up motion) kicks his way down a Paris street in the jerky movements of his videogame hero while sounds of the game punctuate his steps, the film takes us to a birthday party for Mary-Jane's teenage daughter Lucy. Mary-Jane herself is upstairs ministering to her younger daughter Lou (Birkin's daughter, Lou Doillon), who is in bed with a fever, and as the camera surveys the festivities from above, Birkin's voice over signals a reminiscence; this story of *l'amour fou* has already occurred and is being narrated as remembered past. Thus each return to Mary-Jane's voice over will anchor the events in recollection, positing a perspective from which to evaluate the indiscretions of this desiring woman and to learn from her experience.

This structuring dialectic between past and present, sound and

are physical features and remembered events. Of *Jane B.* Varda image – typical of the Varda text – is referred to explicitly in *Jane B.*, where Birkin's scenario is specifically discussed by the actress-scenarist and the director. In *Jane B.*, Birkin describes in a voice-over conversation with Varda as the camera caresses the luxurious panelled walls of what has to be one of the most exquisite bathrooms in the world:

I usually write here . . . it's the only place where I'm really alone. It's a story about a woman like me – actually, it is me – who falls in love with a very young guy. It's a love story with a sad ending, and I tell it to myself as if it were already in the past, as if it were already a memory even before having taken place. I like sadness. Also, I usually write in the imperfect . . . with commentary first. It could begin like this. . . .

At this point in *Jane B.*, a voice-over narration (*not* included in *Kung-Fu*) begins, a *préface manquée* which, while unspoken, is implicit in the actual opening of *Kung-Fu Master*.

In *Kung-Fu* itself, it is Mary-Jane's voice over that recounts: 'That day it was raining. Lou had a fever, and we'd quickly put plastic over the courtyard for Lucy's party. But the kids couldn't care less about the rain, or about Lou.' The image of little Lou in bed, calling for her mother (who is at the window looking down at the dancing teens), brings us into the present depiction of these recounted events and to the beginning of this story of *le petit amour*. A party guest named Julien becomes ill from the effects of pilfered vodka and Mary-Jane helps him to throw up. She returns to her daughter and while she sings a gentle lullaby that her mother had sung to her, Julien stands in the doorway and watches. Almost immediately afterward (a shot of the bathroom shelf signals an indeterminate temporal ellipsis), in a sequence that has the effect of simultaneously crystallizing and introducing the constitutive and intersecting functions of desire and the gaze, Varda orchestrates images of Mary-Jane, Lucy, and a framed wall-mirror (in one extraordinarily complex single shot, for the most part) with reflections on beauty, identity and love.

A closeup of Lucy's face in the mirror is matched by silence; one of Mary-Jane in the doorway initiates her voice over: 'I wonder if she's got a boyfriend yet'. A profile of Lucy looking at the mirror accompanies Mary-Jane's continued voice over: 'She's so pretty; and she's such a good girl'. Mary-Jane now intervenes in this profile shot of Lucy by playfully blowing on her daughter's neck as the synch sound initiates a system of variations within the shot. Mother and daughter talk about the party, how young boys drink, how Lucy doesn't, and how Julien is shy and funny at the same time. A choreography of camera and character

movements in this tightly enclosed space produces varied configurations within a single shot: Lucy and Mary-Jane alone or together in the frame, sometimes multiplied by their reflection in the mirror, sometimes not. When the daughter exits the frame, her mother, left with her own reflected image in the mirror – a double vision of the woman – picks up the voice-over reverie: ‘So his name is Julien, this little vomiting guy. His look made me uneasy. Especially when he watched me sing. That both bothered and aroused me’. The camera has been slowly moving in until the shot shows only Mary-Jane’s face framed in the mirror, repeating the shot of Lucy that had opened this exchange and substituting mother for daughter: ‘One couldn’t hide the fact that he was somewhat pitiful. And I found him menacing . . .’. (The voice over carries to the next sequence; ‘I wanted to see him again’ accompanying a shot of his school seen from the windshield of her car.)

And so begins the obsession that has Mary-Jane following this boy to his school, to his video arcade, to his haunts; getting to know him; establishing first a flirtation and then a relationship; and finally incurring social ostracism for allowing her fantasies to evolve into action. But as the sequence just described suggests, and even requires, our reading of the film is shaped less in terms of a teleology of passion than it is in terms of relations of feminine desire. For what this sequence so early in the film conveys, through the epiphanic condensation reminiscent of haiku, is the force of female subjectivity and its interrelations, articulated in images of the woman that variously double, triple, and quadruple before becoming singular again. Mother looks at daughter looking at herself, then contemplates her own image as she rejects the masculine gaze. And each articulated concern hinges on some relation of the feminine, putting into play the varied aspects of female identity itself.

The structural analogue to this mother-daughter scene is found much later, almost three-quarters of the way through the film, just before the catalyzing sequence that defines its climax. It is in the lush Spring garden of Mary-Jane’s parents’ home in England during Easter vacation that Lucy sees her mother and Julien kiss. Mother and daughter tearfully argue as they circle one another in a movement that reiterates the former scene, the rectangular mirror frame now echoed by a doorway in the background. The confrontation reaches its peak when Lucy angrily runs off as Mary-Jane tells her daughter that this garden is where she, at Lucy’s age, kissed her own fourteen year-old boyfriends. The pivotal generational theme is punctuated by the end of the shot when, as the camera rests on a medium closeup of a nonplussed Mary-Jane (the image given a distancing two-dimensionality by the white fence behind her), an imaginary conversation in voice

over (in English) takes place between Mary-Jane and her own mother: 'I didn't do anything wrong, Ma'. 'No, you never did. You've always been my good girl. And brave. Come on, let's not spoil the day for the little ones.' A breathtaking intimacy is created by these half-whispered words, and the subtle intersecting of female relationships is rendered in an economy of sound and image that acts as a soothing counterpoint to the confrontation that precedes it.

Later that day (but only one and a half minutes in screen time), Mary-Jane's mother confirms her function as facilitator of her daughter's desire by encouraging her to go off to a remote island with Julien, 'to find out what you have to find out'. This is depicted in yet another maternal configuration, one which replaces Lucy with her grandmother and thus moves the representation of mother and daughter back a generation. Again there is a single shot in which the two women move around each other, but it shares the warmth and intimacy of the earlier sequence over its confrontational avatar. The shot ends with mother holding daughter in her arms and, while the two stare out at the viewer, the former says 'Love is the biggest mystery of life'. Thus Mary-Jane's mother has what she herself cannot possess: compassion and understanding for her daughter's feelings of desire.

The implausibility of such a proposition – a mother encouraging her daughter in an audaciously impossible love affair – can only be troubling if one applies such inappropriate criteria of realism as 'character motivation'. But in *Kung-Fu Master*, Mary-Jane is a woman about whom we literally know nothing, except that she desires: she is desire itself. The film has as its project to dramatize this all-encompassing passion, its consequences and its impossibility, leaving the well-rounded, fully developed 'person' to other fictional enterprises. In speaking of the film, Varda points out that 'passion is what we don't know about, the rest is just a love affair'.⁶ Thus questions about the logical or believable behaviour of the characters address only the story, the love affair. Varda's concerns lie elsewhere – with the dynamic of desire, that 'unknown/unknowable' problematic of the desiring woman and its representation. She continues, 'I love to approach stories which are impossible from the outside, but which – from *within* the film – are totally possible'.⁷ Consequently, the film dictates its own terms as we follow this woman who projects her own desires onto the *tabula rasa* of a boy, a child who is the same age she herself was when she first fell in love. In a sense, Mary-Jane recreates *herself* at fourteen, and it is in this context of 'within the film' that the mother's words must be understood: the logic of *Kung-Fu Master* dictates that this passion must be explored.

6 Varda, *Film Notes, Perspectives on French Cinema*, 1988.

7 Ibid.

The self-awareness that Mary-Jane gains on this exquisite island whose craggy rocks and iridescent waters provide a symbolic locale equivalent to the heroine's inexpressible feelings, comes at great expense. The social consequences of her passion destroy her family; the boy's mother is enraged, Lucy must change schools and move in with her father, and Mary-Jane herself is ostracized. But Varda's characteristic combination of irony and affection provides a wealth of critical reflection on the structure of gender relations to compensate for the emotional chaos at the level of the story. In a clever cinematic critique of the excessive machismo required of teenage boys, Varda has Julien assume a posture of bravado and cynically comment to his friends in the schoolyard regarding his affair: 'She was a housewife with big feet and a flat chest . . . She was crazy about me, but she was really old. It was no big thing . . . you do what you have to do'. As he drags on his cigarette, Julien evokes those adolescent figures whose emergence into manhood was the stuff of early new wave films; Varda thereby pays a sort of sceptical homage to the masculine underpinnings of the film movement that she originated. But lest Julien's gesture be taken in isolation, Varda is careful to contextualize it within the more general analysis of relations between the sexes that the film traces out.

The sequence shortly before Julien's insensitive pronouncement, one which both elaborates on the feminist themes of the film and provides its resolution, offers one final exchange between Mary-Jane and Lucy. Here mother and daughter achieve a kind of sharing that seemed impossible earlier in the film. Bolstered by the shapes and colours of the island – images that remain for her as a sustaining memory – Mary-Jane is now capable of understanding Lucy. Her self-absorption transformed into genuine interest in her daughter, she can finally hear what Lucy has to say. They discuss school, videogames, friends and the like, and Lucy recites a list of qualities she admires in a boy. The discovery that both mother and daughter enjoyed reading Boris Vian's *L'Ecume des jours* is a shared delight. Finally, a mood of serenity envelops the moment, rendering the intimacy of female reciprocity in subtle yet emphatic detail.

This echoes even through the film's abrupt ending, a punctuating schoolbell over black leader that closes Julien's final deadpan phrase, 'You do what you have to do'. The implicit comparison evoked by the juxtaposition of the two closing sequences (one with mother and daughter, one with Julien) suggests two ways of relating to experience, feminine and masculine. In this light, the film's somewhat startling closure on a teenage kid's exaggerated masculinity must be understood as evidence of Varda's pervasive critique of patriarchal social relations, rather than, as some have claimed, a kind of advocacy.

Mother and daughter
reconcile through shared
confidences
Courtesy of Ciné-Tamaris/
Agnès Varda



This is a confusion *Kung-Fu Master* shares with *Le Bonheur*, its closest analogue; both films have been misunderstood by those who, reading too literally, mistake Varda's trenchant irony for a valorization of machismo. Instead, Varda's subtle comment on gender relations combines a penetrating critique of masculine posturing with a powerful exploration of female identity. Rather than a focus on particular obsessions (plausible or not), the films examine what is revealed by those obsessions, and suggest social conclusions about relations between the sexes. The nexus of gendered relations and attitudes takes precedence over particular characters' struggles, creating out of each conflict a demonstration of aspects of the social complex. Julien's videogame hero rescues Sylvia, but their happiness is shortlived. Mary-Jane realizes her impossible fantasy but that too is ephemeral. However, what the viewer of *Kung-Fu Master* comes away with, as a result of experiencing the dual passions, is a deeper and more complex understanding of those elusive social categories of sexuality and gender.

Considerations of female authorship are added to these categories – they are in fact foregrounded – in *Jane B.* by Agnès V. The inclusion of her own name in the title itself gives some indication of the priority Varda places on questions of authorship in this film. For, as is reiterated throughout *Jane B.*, a portrait is never a fixed object or a finite rendering of its subject. Rather, it is a reciprocal process of production born in an engagement between author (painter, filmmaker) and represented person. And there is also, inevitably, the viewer whose function as *both* 'author' and 'subject' triangulates this movement. Because *Jane B.* is a cinematic paradigm for these processes, much of what Varda has to say is explicitly in the film itself, either in Varda's own

8 Varda acknowledged this in her remarks at Boulder, noting that the Flemish painters were of particular interest to her because they 'had patience'. Varda's experience as a photographer (she was the official photographer for Jean Vilar's Théâtre National Populaire) also served her well, as demonstrated by the compositional power of her shots.

9 Agnès Varda, publicity material for *Jacquot*, Sony Pictures, Classic Release, 1992.

10 Agnès Varda, University of Colorado. Ciné-Tamaris production notes state: 'Ideally, *Jane B. par Agnès V.* should be viewed and, a day later, the second film, *Kung-Fu Master*. In between, the spectator should do his share of daydreaming'.

onscreen appearances in dialogue with Birkin or in voice-over reflexion that accompanies the images. This is so much the case that one has the overwhelming impression of Varda's presence throughout the film, in spite of the fact that she actually appears only a few times.

As Varda's point of departure for this film is the portrait, its densely allusive structure references oil painting in a variety of ways, in an effort to evoke both a representational tradition and the *process* of portraiture itself. She invents the genre of the 'cinematic portrait' through a collage-type method that blends and juxtaposes different materials and discourses, exploring the relation between the different signifying structures in painted and cinematic portraits.⁸ The fragmented, contrapuntal organization of *Jane B.* also evokes women's place within both of these traditions, as we see Jane Birkin assume various fictional roles and figurative personae throughout the film.

Her most recent film, *Jacquot* (formerly *Jacquot de Nantes* [1990]), continues this kind of work on cinematic portraiture by constructing a tender, meditative reverie on the life and filmmaking of Jacques Demy (1931–90). Interweaving narrative dramatizations of Demy's childhood, contemporary shots and conversations with him and intermittent clips from his eleven films, Varda creates a cinematic portrait that is also a reflection on the consuming passion to make films, the enchantment and fascination of filmmakers, and the sustaining power of friendship and love. According to Varda, Demy 'was flattered and happy with the project. . . . His childhood was the chance to smile at himself, when he was inventive and happy. . . . He saw me growing enamored of the dreamy and temperamental young boy, the clever and angry teenager, and the Bressonian young man. The three were Jacquot, all the Jacquots before the Jacques I met when he was 27'.⁹ With this film she thus continues her concern with the intersecting processes of portraiture and authorship through a cinematic 'evocation' made up of images and memories.

But perhaps most important to Varda in this enterprise of cinematic portraiture is the effect this kind of filmwork has on the spectator. She has stated explicitly that she is interested in 'What we can do with our own friendships, our desires for expression, as a result of seeing this film'.¹⁰ In her construction of this fictional portrait – this *portrait imaginaire* – she literally invites us to explore along with her this affectionate examination of two lives in a dialogue between two women. In the process, Varda combines the fictional and the actual, the imaginary and the real; bits of 'documentary' history of Birkin's life are intertwined with more imaginary flights of fancy, excerpts of films she never made, startling and inventive image-conceptions. 'A

real actress is speaking, telling her story – with fake seagulls.”¹¹ Conceived as a series of propositions, Varda actually considers the film ‘a documentary about memory’, and says its achievement lies in its ability to lead us to think about ourselves; it is successful if it involves and concerns us.

Jane B. by Agnès V. is an extraordinary film that emerged from fairly ordinary circumstances: Birkin had seen Varda’s *Vagabond* and was interested in making a film with its director. Varda’s response was to make a film about the actress herself rather than placing her as a character within a specific fiction. In fact, to French audiences Jane Birkin is much more than an actress; she is a veritable media personality, a megastar whose personal life and every activity – beyond those acknowledged performances as an actress or a singer – has captured the public imagination. Birkin seems to have made her life itself into a performance, whether as a sixties icon or an eighties personality. (She has also just written and directed her first television film, *Oh Pardon! Tu dormais* [1992]). Birkin’s celebrity, and the peculiar interaction of exhibitionism/voyeurism that it puts into play, seems to have been one of Varda’s concerns, and the film explores the constant, reversible oscillation of public and private that is resumed by Birkin’s status as a media star. According to Varda, her cinematic portrait of Birkin takes ‘turning forty’ as its subject; she was fascinated by this pivotal age – which is neither young nor old – and sought a cinematic structure that would both render the complexity of the issues involved and reflect on cinematic language. Thus the film’s first meeting between Jane and Agnès does not occur without a short preface, one which puts into play a number of visual and auditory references that form a matrix from which flow the film’s varied propositions

A *mise-en-abyme* of feminine representation comes to rest on a pictorial trope: a servant searching the contents of a chest
Courtesy of Ciné-Tamaris/
Agnès Varda



about age, identity, fiction, memory, femininity, friendship, and representation.

The film opens with what is clearly a literal *tableau vivant* – real figures populating a classic painting – the identity of which will be revealed gradually and fully only later in the film (approximately two-thirds of the way through). Jane, attired as a sixteenth century lady-in-waiting in pale yellow dress and linen cap, is seated at the centre of the frame, a window and potted dwarf tree in the background. She is flanked by two female figures, one a young woman in classical pose, nude to the waist, the other an older woman, a servant in russet skirt and white and brown bodice. Jane's comic recollection of her thirtieth birthday in London (being sick, looking at her fevered face in the mirror), recounted in monotone as she and the camera remain stationary, is preceded by Varda's initiating voice over. Varda's words seem to hover over the film, much like her initial voice over in *Vagabond*; both statements set the reflective tone for each film, giving them a wistful aura of pondering, wondering, exploring. 'It's a very peaceful image, out of time, completely immobile. It gives you the feeling of time passing, drop by drop, each minute, each instant, weeks, years . . . '.

The image that we see – the (human) painting – suggests a version of Titian's 'Venus of Urbino', and it opens and closes the film. (We will, in fact, see the 'painting' in its entirety later in the film.) After the course of its ninety-seven minutes the film seems to return us to the beginning with Jane, again in pale yellow, seated in the centre of the stage-like space. But this time ten years have passed; Jane is turning forty the next day and, as the film ends, she is being honoured by the cast and crew who wish her 'Happy Birthday' with a cake, gerbera daisies and gifts. Varda's choice of this painting is not arbitrary. As one of the great masters of the Italian Renaissance, Titian introduced to the Venetian School a vigorous palette and an appreciation of the compositional value of backgrounds and is known, among other things, for both his observant portraits and his joyous treatment of mythological subjects. In three areas of particular interest to Varda (especially in reference to *Jane B.*), Titian is unparalleled. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, Titian's paintings of Venus set the standard for physical beauty through a sumptuous eroticism that maintained a classic grace. His portraits offer a searching and penetrating look at human character, while his mythological paintings capture the sense of abandon that characterized the pagan world of antiquity. In *Jane B.*, Varda can be seen to transpose ingeniously this tripartite brilliance to the cinematic canvas which is her text. From the very first shot, a rich history of pictorial representation is condensed, and is posited as a reference point returned to throughout the film.

Jane Birkin having been introduced to the viewer by this 'preface', the film's next sequence offers the credits: as The Doors' song 'The Changeling' throbs on the soundtrack, Birkin strides across the Champs Elysées at night as a camera and lighting equipment track her movements (another camera, of course, is tracking theirs). The film's title (with 'b. for BIRKIN, v. for VARDA') and credits appear, only to end in a shock cut to the next sequence. Silence and natural sound introduce Jane to Agnès as they meet in a busy cafe to discuss the possibility of a project, and thus begins the mutual exploration of authorship, identity, and female desire. As noted, the film's complex, multilayered structure makes a total analysis beyond the scope of this article; what follows is a selection of only a few crucial moments in the text.

Varda's and Birkin's first explicit conversation about cinematic authorship is generated by this meeting in the cafe but, as will prove typical of the film's strategies, it miraculously moves them to a forest where a round mirror in a square gilt frame is affixed to a tree. In a complex metaphoric interplay involving both dialogue and image, actress and director discuss the permutations of looking – the camera, the mirror – that involve both self-scrutiny and objectification, an exchange of subject positions that is always activated in the course of filming. Varda notices that Jane never looks directly at the camera. Jane responds that she is embarrassed to look into the lens because it is too personal, 'like looking you in the eye'. Her comments are prefaced by the first in a series of paradigmatic and punctuating shots of the camera lens in direct frontality. Varda's counter, 'and if it were a mirror?' is met with Jane's assertion that in a

A complex relay of viewing relations which place the spectator at the centre: 'artist' and 'model' mirrored in each other's gaze
Courtesy of Ciné-Tamaris/
Agnès Varda



mirror one looks only at oneself. However, as Jane looks at herself in the gilt-framed mirror, whose circular shape echoes the camera lens just seen, Varda's own reflection suddenly appears:

It'll be as if I'm filming your self-portrait, but there won't always be just you in the mirror. There will be the camera and me (a bit the same thing), and so what if I appear in the mirror or in the visual field . . . ? The cinema is twenty-four different portraits a second, or an hour. I want you to look at the camera – inside it – as much as possible.

At this point (much like Lucy and Mary-Jane in *Kung-Fu Master*) Agnès is framed in the circular mirror while to its side stands the rather angular Jane. Thus artist and subject are bound in the same image, themselves both taken as the subject of an anterior artist, the camera eye/the spectator's view. This configuration suggests several questions: to what extent is the portrait an image of the person? To what extent is it an image of the artist? Is the portrait a composite of both subject and object or do these terms, continually and dialectically, shift in the process of portraiture itself?

After a return to the cafe, artist and model are now in an *atelier* as the conversation continues. Jane's playfully distorted reflection in a funhouse mirror provokes her observation: 'What's important is the eye behind the camera, or the person with the paintbrush'. Varda then evokes Lautréamont's famous definition of beauty as random chance, substituting 'editing table' for 'dissecting table', among other things.¹² Then suddenly, magically, a composite 'painting' of Goya's 'Clothed Maja' and Titian's 'Venus' appears, as if conjured by Varda's directive: 'What if we began with an 'official portrait' in the manner of Titian or Goya?' Titian's background (the yellow-robed maid looking into a chest by the potted tree, the russet-clad servant looking on) is the setting for Jane, reclining on a couch in the pink-sashed white gown of Goya's Maja. The configuration thus recalls both of the Masters' portraits, then introduces a final type of 'look' at the woman – the camera's languorous caress in closeup of the representational terrain of the woman's body: toes, hip, breast, face, eye and smile. A slowly contemplative tracking shot thereby produces the woman's body as landscape, that field across which play multiple possible reflections about women's representation and self-representation. This will be a *different* kind of portrait, a woman looking at a woman, one that reworks the patriarchal tradition of portraiture in the crucible of the cinematic gaze.

The film then proceeds to take us along with Jane Birkin as she speaks about her past, her life, her family, her house, her career, her doubts, her dreams and her desires. We follow her as she assumes various guises and fictional personae (for example,

12 The complete phrase is: 'Beautiful, like the chance encounter between a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table', from Isidore Ducasse, *Les Chants de Maldoror par le Comte de Lautréamont* (1869), cited by André Breton as the ideal definition of the Surrealist image. Varda's variant is: 'Beautiful, like the chance encounter of a refreshing androgynous and a modelling clay Eve on an editing table'.

an art dealer, a femme fatale, an old woman, an African explorer, a Pre-Raphaelite muse, a Flemish noblewoman, Calamity Jane, Joan of Arc and so forth). We listen to her as, with a gentle sense of self-scrutiny, she discusses what it is like to be an actress, a singer, and a writer. Throughout the film, Birkin carries on a continuing dialogue with Varda, whose voice-over presence is a function of Jane's address (or response). In addition, as with the sequence just under discussion, Varda herself makes several onscreen appearances, each underlining her concerns as a director and her interests as an artist.

One such moment occurs about midway through the film in a richly textured sequence that allows both actress and filmmaker to convey their ideas about their respective professions. Taken as a whole, the disparate elements of the sequence construct a meditation on desire: the desire to make films, the desire to be in films and the inclusive desire to express or capture the essence of a person in a portrait (which could also be seen, not coincidentally, as the desire to direct or act). The sequence is framed by the actress's discourse, spoken by Jane in the black and red costume of a Spanish dancer. Signifier of performance *par excellence*, this costume occasions Jane's outburst against the false and manipulative charade that acting can be: 'I want to make a film with me just like I am, in my jeans and sweater. No costumes, no makeup – as if I were transparent, anonymous, as if I were anyone'. Suddenly we see her as her quite 'ordinary' self, in jeans and blue sweater, Mick Jagger haircut, in front of her house . . . as the Mary-Jane of *Kung-Fu Master*. Varda responds in voice over as the camera stays on a closeup of Birkin, listening: 'You're the queen of paradoxes. You want to be a star (and everything that goes with it – money, fame) and yet you want to be filmed transparently, like the guy in the street. . . . You're original and at the same time you want to appear anonymous.' This is, in fact, a crucial part of Varda's cinematic portrait of Birkin: an actress who can be anyone and yet remain herself; who desires to be both, and lives in this contradiction. It is also the central paradox of identity itself; the driving mechanism of cinematic identification. Thus what is so essentially personal about this portrait becomes a very public meditation on the desiring mechanisms of cinematic representation.

A shot of the back of the camera (and thus one in a paradigm introduced early in the film) provides a hinge, and introduces Varda's next account, which she now delivers onscreen as she addresses the camera frontally in a black polka-dot jacket. She tells a story from her youth about 'L'Inconnue de la Seine', a young suicide whose deathmask showed an enigmatic smile and excited the popular imagination: 'No one knew anything about

her, so everyone could project their own fantasies onto her'. This suggestive observation on the fantasmatic underpinnings of identification provokes a meditative reflection on the idea of the portrait. Now Agnès's languorous voice over (matching that which opened the film) accompanies a serene plaster mask of a woman superimposed over a blue ocean, which is then transformed into Jane's face over the same ocean: 'Sometimes I wonder if the only true portrait is a kind of mask. A face that's immobile, frontal. That's what remains of someone Or an identification photo, always immobile, always frontal'.

By this time, Jane's face becomes the speaking person, black background and scoopneck leotard concretizing the identity photo. The irony here, of course, is that after all we've seen (and are about to see), there is nothing 'true' about this particular portrait at all. The purest facts, those undeniable points of identity, are in some sense the furthest from the truth of the individual. They give us a picture, but one which leaves all the work to be done. A composite of physical features may be materially accurate, but it will never have the accuracy of the heart that makes a person who they are. After a silence she says, 'I'm Jane B. I'm British. My height right now is five feet, seven inches. No particular features. No exceptional talents. But I'm here. You look at me. And time passes.'

Varda turns this direct and monotone statement of fact into a repartee, a conversation. It is now she who is dressed in red and black, seated among the red and white benches of the outdoor stage where (we assume) Jane was performing her Flamenco dance . . . and her tantrum. Varda articulates the filmmaker's desire – *her* desire – as both an expression of self and an acknowledgment of the other, the actress who has spoken her identity.

Some time has already passed. And you, with your desire to be known/unknown. You offer yourself to everyone's imagination. That's what fascinated me. And made me want to make this film. Because I can 'dress you up' in my reveries, my stories of mythology, my cinematic souvenirs, things I have in mind. And then, I can 'disguise' you!

Jane, once again in her Flamenco costume, responds, taking up the actor's perspective on what Varda has just said, and confirming the crucial function of intersubjectivity in representation. The important thing, she asserts, is not the costumes, but the actors with whom one works. She then describes her appreciation for Michel Piccoli, whose generous acting style made her do her best. In response to a question by Varda, she says she'd like to work with Jean-Pierre Leaud, and, as the sequence ends, this initiates a post-new wave scene in a

park with the popular French actor, who at once parodies and performs himself.

One of Varda's 'stories of mythology' which figures prominently in *Jane B.* is that of Ariadne, the ingenious woman who helped Theseus find his way out of the Minotaur's maze. Daughter of Pasiphae and the Cretan king Minos, Ariadne fell in love with the Athenean hero Theseus, and used a thread with glittering jewels to help him escape the Labyrinth after he slew the monstrous half-bull/half-man that Minos kept there. There are various versions of what happened next: Ariadne was abandoned by Theseus and she subsequently hanged herself; Theseus carried her to Naxos and left her there to die or to marry the wine god Dionysus; or she died in childbirth on Cyprus. Varda uses Ariadne's story as a metaphor for her textual production, and she self-reflexively incorporates this myth into *Jane B.* by way of a discussion with Birkin about the film they are making together. Seated outdoors among stones and ferns, Agnès (in black polka-dot skirt) and Jane (in jeans and loose jacket) talk about the freedom of the film's random structure (a film *en ballade*).

We agreed to make this kind of desultory film, allowing us to go one place, then another. If we decide to make a detour, we'll see where it takes us . . . I love labyrinths. I like the idea of not knowing the course until the end. We'll leave clues, like Ariadne, who used a string. I see you as Ariadne – shrewd, then loving, and then abandoned on the beach.

At this point Jane, in Greek garb, threads her way through a maze of mirrors and red girders with a spool of string held high. 'I understand the legend a bit differently [return to Agnès and Jane]. I see two in the Labyrinth, Ariadne and Theseus, or Ariadne and the Minotaur. In any case, there is a monster who pursues her, someone who pursues her, someone who pursues *you*.' Now it is the camera who follows Jane/Ariadne closely amid the red girders, a monster-camera-minotaur who reworks the myth in terms of the centrality of women's experience and female identity. This striking shot will appear later in the film in an extended version, when the sounds of seagulls and the ocean (present here) are amplified and accompanied by classical music. This later sequence, a single long and sinuous tracking shot of Ariadne being chased by the camera, appears as a symbolic and mythological respite, encased between two portions of a fairly violent scenario (a continuation of the first mini-narrative in the film) involving Jane as an art dealer/thief and Philippe Léotard as her angry lover/accomplice. In both cases, the image of Ariadne provokes associative reflection on women's agile strength in a world of complex obstacles.

When the shot returns to the two women, Jane picks up the thread of the conversation: 'Do you think you'll get out of it [the film]? Get to the end?' Agnès responds: 'It's like when one does a puzzle, there are bits here and there, and little by little the design is revealed. And then one finds an empty space. Things happen by coincidence.' And this aleatory openness is exactly the structure of the film. Meaning emerges from unexpected juxtapositions, and patterns form only once the course of the film is run. A dizzying textual density is provided by the liberating shock of association, meanings reverberate with a random energy, and a complex design takes shape. Ariadne, a figure of patient wisdom, stands as much for the work of the two women who make the film as she does for the film itself.

The force of random chance, the Surrealists' *l'imprévu objectif* (the unforeseen objectified) is variously referenced throughout *Jane B.*, from the turning pages of an artbook with reproductions of Hieronymous Bosch and Paul Delvaux to the astounding circular pan of Magritte paintings in a gambling sequence involving a roulette wheel. The film's densely allusive texture (Varda: 'I work by reverie rather than psychology') allows images and references to circulate, ceaselessly provoking associations in the intratextual network of the film. The Bosch painting reappears as a modified *tableau vivant*, in which naked gamblers perch around the roulette wheel. The Delvaux reappears in reproduction, a sudden, momentary reference, during Jane's discussion of her scenario about a woman's love for a young boy. One other image from the turning pages bears note, particularly because it at once crystallizes Varda's method and signifies the complex temporality of her structure. It is one of the composite portraits by Giuseppe Arcimboldo, the sixteenth century Italian painter whose surrealism *avant la lettre* created unusual and bizarre effects through the construction of allegorical characters from everyday objects, animals, flowers and fruit. The value of these startling compositions goes beyond playfulness to the heart of signification itself. In the words of Roland Barthes:

Like a baroque poet, Arcimboldo exploits the 'curiosities' of language, plays on synonymy and homonymy. His painting has a linguistic basis, his imagination is, strictly speaking, poetic: it does not create signs, it combines them, permutes them, deflects them – precisely what the practitioner of language does.¹³

Like this ingenious portraitist, Varda engages in the play of surprise and discovery in the construction of her films. She has always found something powerful, hypnotic, and fascinating in the free play of random chance. For her, the dizzying sense of disorientation that comes from the perpetual game of associations

¹³ Roland Barthes, 'Arcimboldo, or magician and rhetoricien', *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), p. 131.

is always a *productive* sense as well. Whether the multiple permutations of 'character' and 'plot' are honed into a single fiction, or they reverberate in a discursive frame, Varda offers an extraordinary richness of meaning in her cinematic texts. To paraphrase Barthes, whose reference is Arcimboldo: to surprise is an act of knowledge, to change knowledge is to experiment with subverting our usual classifications; this is the noble function of magic, 'summa of natural wisdom'. Thus Varda proceeds, from game to grand rhetoric (of poets like Clément Marot), from rhetoric to magic, and from magic to wisdom. *Kung-Fu Master* and *Jane B.* by Agnès V. offer us dazzling and exemplary portraits, paradigmatic sites where this alchemy of the intellect takes place.

Questions of identity in Beur cinema: from *Tea in the Harem* to *Cheb*

CARRIE TARR

¹ See Stuart Hall's articles on 'New Ethnicities' in James Donald and Ali Rattansi (eds), *Race, Culture and Difference* (Milton Keynes: Open University, 1992) and 'European cinema on the verge of a nervous breakdown', in Duncan Petrie (ed.), *Screening Europe: Image and Identity in Contemporary European Cinema* (London: BFI Working Papers, 1992).

² See Ginette Vincendeau, 'Women's cinema, film theory and feminism in France', *Screen*, vol. 28, no. 4 (1987), pp. 4–18.

The theoretical debates informing British and North American analyses of the representation of 'new ethnicities' in popular culture¹ are largely absent from French discourses on race, immigration and national identity. The French academy has remained impervious, if not hostile, to the development of contemporary critical theories on the construction of the subject which feed the political agenda informing both cultural studies and women's studies. Feminists have noted with concern the failure of the French critical establishment to take on board some twenty years of feminist film theory.² Still predominantly influenced by semiotic and auteurist approaches to film analysis, and indifferent to anything that smacks of 'ideology', film theory and film criticism in France have continued to marginalize issues around gender, sexuality, race and national identity.

Filmmakers from ethnic minorities in France are unlikely to find support for any openly political project in mainstream French cinema, especially if they turn for funding to state and industry subsidies, notably the *avance sur recettes* (advance on box-office receipts). A proposal must either show evidence of commercial appeal (a sound script, the use of stars, entertainment value) or potential as a self-expressive auteur film. There has been to date no equivalent of the BFI or Channel 4 at a national level to give a boost to alternative filmmaking practices, and no equivalent of groups like Sankofa or the Black Audio Workshop to provide

3 The American title *Tea in the Harem* will be used hereafter for convenience.

4 The first recorded usage of the word *Beur* was at the end of 1981 with the appearance of Radio *Beur*, a local radio station in the Paris area. See Alec Hargreaves, *Voices from the North African Immigrant Community in France* (Berg, 1990), p. 29. This book provides an invaluable account of *Beur* writing in the 1980s.

practical and theoretical resources for aspiring minority filmmakers.

Nevertheless, from the late 1970s onwards, independent and community-based filmmakers from France's most visible ethnic minority group, the 'second generation' North Africans, began to produce a number of shorts and documentaries, both commercially and noncommercially. These films, mostly of a militant-informative nature, engaged with the conflicts and tensions of the immigrant experience in France, but were mainly dependent on alternative exhibition circuits. When in the mid-1980s 'second generation' filmmakers achieved popular successes with commercially-made feature films, critics began to speak of a new phenomenon in French cinema, the *cinéma beur* or *Beur* cinema. This article sets out to analyse how questions of identity and subjectivity are articulated in four *Beur*-authored commercial feature films: *Le Thé au harem d'Archimède/Tea in the Harem of Archimedes*³ (Mehdi Charef, 1985), *Bâton Rouge*, (Rachid Bouchareb, 1986), *Miss Mona* by Charef (1987) and *Cheb* by Bouchareb (1991). These questions cannot be addressed without locating the films in their sociopolitical context.

The word '*beur*' is reputedly derived from Parisian backslang for '*arabe*' (Arab), and was in circulation within the immigrant community in the late 1970s.⁴ Its hybrid form reflects the conflict of identity experienced by the newly visible 'second generation' (as they are still called). On the one hand, they owed allegiance to the culture of their Maghrebian (Arab or Berber) parents who tended to maintain their original national identity, be it Algerian, Tunisian or Moroccan, and even to dream of the return to the homeland. They differed from the French in appearance, in their geographical location on the outskirts and in the ghettos of French urban society, and in that their parents continued to practice their own language, customs and religion (Islam). On the other hand, despite their family backgrounds, they were also the products of the secular French education system, knew no other home but France, were often out of sympathy with their parents' values and had higher expectations than their parents of their future role in French society.

The tensions between the different sets of cultural roles and expectations were exacerbated by two factors, particularly for those of Algerian origin (the majority): conflicting nationality laws and the growth of racism. Whereas after independence in 1962, Algeria continued to consider the children of immigrants to be Algerian (and expected young males to do two years' national service in Algeria), the 'second generation' born in France also had the right to French nationality. Often against their parents' wishes, they had to claim that right (entailing a year's national service in France for young males) in order to get their national

identity card. Additionally, as 'Arabs' (as all those of North African origin were – and are – indiscriminately called), they were the primary targets of the increasingly hostile climate of racism in France, which came to the foreground in the early 1980s, as demonstrated by the spectacular rise of the extreme rightwing *Front National*, led by Jean-Marie Le Pen.

Racism against 'Arabs' in France is deeply entrenched in French society as a result of France's imperial past in North Africa and the relatively recent, long and bitter struggle for Algerian independence. It surfaced in the late 1970s and early 1980s as the 'second generation' became more visible, due to an increase in population combined with an increase in family immigration in the 1970s (primary immigration was halted by the French government in 1974 to combat unemployment).

Immigrants found themselves the focus for French fears and anxieties about unemployment and law and order and, although after Mitterrand's election in 1981 some of the harsher tactics adopted by the previous government were dropped, there was a great deal of unrest among the immigrant communities as a result. The situation was exploited by the *Front National* in the municipal elections of March 1983, and there followed a wave of racist attacks in what became known as '*l'été meurtrier*' (the murderous summer). If the immigrant communities had pinned their hopes for change on the election of the Socialist Party, Mitterrand's policies in relation to immigration and racism were soon perceived to be vacillating if not ineffectual.

As a result, the Beurs began to assert themselves in a more organized way. The late 1970s and early 1980s had already seen the development of Beur theatre groups and other associations, and when the new administration granted immigrants the right of free association, a plethora of new community cultural organizations sprang up (working in film, radio, rock music and so on). There had also been some attempts to develop a youth-based antiracist movement through events like 'Rock Against Police' in 1980. In 1983, the Beurs organized a 'March against Racism and for Equality', which crossed France from Marseille to Paris, where it was received by Mitterrand, and attracted 100,000 demonstrators (both French and immigrant). The media dubbed it the March of the Beurs, and for a short period the nation became sympathetic to the Beurs' predicament. However, the movement quickly became fragmented. *Convergence* 84, the next national demonstration, was weakened by internal rifts and the autonomous Beur movement was then dramatically eclipsed by a new rival organization, *SOS Racisme*, set up in October 1984 under the leadership of Harlem Désir (of West Indian origin). *SOS Racisme* successfully mobilized a mass youth movement with its slogan '*Touche pas à mon pote*' ('Lay off my

mate'), but focussed attention on bringing together a wide spectrum of political support to combat Le Pen, rather than drawing attention to the specific needs of the Beur/immigrant communities.

The emergence of a putative Beur cinema has to be seen in the context of this particular conjuncture of socioeconomic and political circumstances. New popular cultural forms did not benefit from the underpinning of a strong, unified political Beur movement, but rather emerged at a time of defiant yet defensive attempts to negotiate a recognition of the Beurs' rights as French citizens and to create a climate of tolerance that would enable them to be more fully integrated into French society. Their precarious position was underlined when the *Front National* polled an exceptionally high number of votes in the 1986 elections and the right wing was returned to power for a year of 'cohabitation' with Mitterrand, during which time the expulsion of lawbreakers to Algeria was reintroduced and immigrants' rights to French nationality came under threat. Although by the end of the decade, a number of Beurs had organized to enter local politics, there were growing fears on the part of immigrants that the construction of 'Fortress Europe' (the Single European Market) would further prejudice their positions. Meanwhile, anti-Arab feeling in France was exacerbated by the Gulf War, and the return of the Right in the elections of March 1993 was followed by a weekend of racist attacks and police violence. The introduction of hardline legislation limiting immigrant (and 'second generation') rights to French nationality and citizenship has been quick to follow.

Beur cinema also needs to be situated in relation to the representations of immigrants in circulation in mainstream French, 'first generation' and North African cinema. Critics reviewing the representation of immigrants in film in France share a common concern, which is voiced in article after article throughout the 1980s, that there should be no repeat of the 'miserabilism' which dogged the 'first generation' films of the 1960s and 1970s, exemplified by Ali Ghalem's films *Mektoub* (1964) and *L'Autre France* (1974). By this, they mean realist films or melodramas which show Arabs as the wretched passive victims of French racism. The label was used to criticize Roger Hanin's well-intentioned *Train d'enfer* (1984), a dramatized reconstruction of a real-life incident when three French soldiers threw a North African from a train to his death.

The same critics have also been concerned that films should move beyond the stereotypes of Arabs which figure in certain French films of the 1970s and 1980s, where Arab roles are confined to the criminal underworld and associated with delinquency, drugs and violence, for example Bob Swain's *La*

Balance (1981) or Maurice Pialat's *Police* (1985). A few French films do in fact present narratives where a Beur or immigrant character has, if not the central, then at least the second role, and a role which gives more recognition to the complexities and contradictions of the immigrant experience, in the manner of Michel Drach's *Elise ou la vraie vie* (1969). One or two films involve female Beur characters, for example *Grand Frère* (1982) by Francis Girod (involving an affair between a French criminal and a Beur prostitute) and Gérard Blain's controversial *Pierre et Djamil* (a 1986 reworking of the Romeo and Juliet story); it is noticeable, though, that these (French-authored) roles confine the Beurettes to the function of objects of sexual exchange. The theme of male friendship across ethnic divides, a major preoccupation of the ensuing Beur films, is developed (if from a French point of view) in *Tchao Pantin* (1983) by Claude Berri and *Laisse Béton* (1983) by Serge Le Péron. This latter film in particular prefigures the particular concerns of the first Beur-authored feature films in its sympathetic construction of working-class youth culture and suburban setting.



French male and Beur youngster shake hands: Gérard Depardieu and Makim Ghanem in *Grand Frère* (1982)
Courtesy: UGC/BFI Stills

Charlotte Silvera's *Louise l'insoumise* (1984) brings a rare female perspective to the problems of immigration, integration and identity, by foregrounding the point of view of a young schoolgirl at odds with her Jewish Tunisian family, now living in France. As yet no Beur women have achieved the funding to make a feature film. However, the work of the independent filmmaker, Farida Belghoul, a militant activist in the Beur movement of the early 1980s, provides an early alternative to

5 Christian Bosséno, 'Immigrant cinema: national cinema – the case of Beur film', in Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau (eds), *Popular European Cinema* (London: Routledge 1992), p. 49.

both the forms and the topics of popular male-authored Beur cinema. Both of her short films, *C'est Madame la France que tu préfères?* (1981) and the formally innovative *Le Départ du père* (1983), explore the dilemmas of a young Beur woman working out her identity in relation to her family. The first centres on a student living away from home to make the most of her independence but feeling guilty about lying to her family, the second features a dialogue between daughter and father, set in Algeria, as the daughter attempts to persuade her father to return to his family in France.

However, the film which most clearly heralded the popular Beur films was *Le Thé à la menthe* *Mint Tea* (1984) by Abdelkrim Bahloul, a film which is considered a Beur film by critics in France, even though it fails to meet the basic criteria for a Beur film as defined by Christian Bosséno, that is, 'any film directed by a young person of North African origin who was born or who grew up in France, usually featuring Beur characters'.⁵ Bahloul is an Algerian, who found himself unemployed in Algeria after studying film in France, and managed to achieve the *avance sur recettes* for a proposal for a short film, which he subsequently successfully transformed into a first feature. The central protagonist of his film is a young immigrant rather than a Beur, and the film is structured around Hamou's attempts to find ways and means of staying in France, while his Algerian mother, having seen what is happening to him in the streets of Barbès, plans to take him back home to Algeria. There is a sense in which Hamou (Abdel Kechiche) draws on the stereotype of the Arab as delinquent, but the film transcends the limitations of such a designation by putting him at the centre of the narrative, humanizing him and refusing to allow him to be seen as a victim. The film is characterized by its comic, lighthearted tone, and Hamou manages to retain audience sympathy through his appealing attempts at street credibility and because his delinquency is clearly compelled by his intractable socioeconomic situation.

Mint Tea draws on a number of themes and sets a tone which has laid the basis for the critics' construction of Beur cinema. It invokes the reality of urban French society through its choice of locations in the busy picturesque multiethnic streets of Barbès, it invites sympathy for the dilemmas of a young (male) immigrant who has little hope of getting a decent job and is forced to turn to street crime and (in this instance) look to French women for support, and it vividly dramatizes the conflict between two cultures through the energetic presence of Chaffia Boudra as Hamou's mother. Significantly, it omits to address head-on the legacy of France's colonization of Algeria or the issue of racism in France, nor does it acknowledge Islam as a major factor in

6 See *Cinématographe* No. 111 (1985); 'Cinéma métis - de Hollywood aux films beurs', *CinémaAction*, no. 56 (July 1990).

7 Christian Bosséno, 'Immigrant cinema', p. 51.

the construction of cultural difference. Young Beur/immigrant women simply do not feature in the film, and on a more symbolic level, in its construction of the Arab family it leaves out of account the figure of the father, a structuring absence which recurs in the later films. Where it differs fundamentally from the Beur films which followed is in the implication that the return to Algeria is a real (if undesired and problematic) alternative. Not surprisingly, the film was read in a number of quarters as endorsing repatriation, a project actively supported by the Right in France at the time of the film's appearance.

Attempts to construct a corpus of Beur films, and to provide a thematic and stylistic analysis of them, are to be found in a collection of articles in *Cinématographe* in 1985 and in *CinémaAction* in 1990.⁶ Christian Bosséno's piece in *Popular European Cinema* reproduces the gist of these articles for an English-speaking audience. In his view, 'the chief interest of Beur films is that by giving substance to a new component of French society and renewing the image of the immigrant in the French cinema they have galvanized the jaded imaginations of those responsible for mainstream productions . . .',⁷ a comment which suggests a lack of concern for the meanings of these films for the Beurs themselves. Although the corpus may differ if Algerian filmmakers are included (for example, Mahmoud Zemmouri's comedies *Prends dix mille balles et casse-toi* (1980) and *Les Folles années du twist* (1983) share common themes and approaches with Beur films), Beur cinema is basically constructed out of twenty or so shorts and documentaries (mostly made in the early 1980s), *Mint Tea* and the feature films of two Beur filmmakers of Algerian origin, Mehdi Charef and Rachid Bouchareb. Even then, there is confusion over whether all of Charef's films can be considered Beur films since the last two, *Camomille* (1987) and *Au pays des Juliets* (1992), are not specifically concerned with Beur or immigrant issues, while *Miss Mona* features an immigrant rather than a Beur.

My concern in this article is with the ways in which questions of Beur identity and subjectivity are articulated in Beur-authored popular cinema, and I shall therefore confine my analysis to the first two Beur feature films, *Tea in the Harem* by Mehdi Charef and *Bâton Rouge* by Rachid Bouchareb, both of which were popular box-office successes (*Tea in the Harem* also won the 1985 Jean Vigo prize and the Caesar for Best First Film); and to the rather less successful followup films, *Miss Mona* by Charef and *Cheb* by Bouchareb. What sort of subject positions do these films make available for a multicultural French audience? How do the films represent and negotiate the tensions between the conflicting cultural identities available to their central protagonists? What is the significance of the insistent marginalization of women in these

male-centred narratives? Can differences between the first and second films be attributed, if tentatively, to the changing positions of the Beurs in French society?

Tea in the Harem

The making of *Tea in the Harem* was the result of a series of lucky breaks for its director, Mehdi Charef, who had managed to write what turned out to be a popular semi-autobiographical novel whilst working in a toolmaking factory in Paris. As a result of clever marketing by his publishers, Mercure de France, (including a successful appearance by Charef on the cult literary chatshow *Apostrophes* early in April 1983), the novel came to the attention of the liberal filmmaker Costa Gavras and his producer/wife Michèle Ray, who wanted to make a film about the Beurs, then a topical progressive issue. Impressed by Charef's screenplay, they invited him to direct the film himself, despite his lack of formal training. Even with Costa Gavras' name associated with the production, having an unknown factory worker as director and no star actors meant that there were considerable difficulties in gaining financing for the film. Gavras was forced to create his own distribution company, but persistence eventually paid off. Michèle Ray also went on to produce Charef's later films.

Le Thé au harem d'Archimède (replacing the novel's even more exotic title *Le Thé au harem d'Archi Ahmed*) is a mischievous title. The film fails to deliver on its eastern promise; instead, the title turns out to be a play on words based on a schoolboy's miswriting of 'le théorème d'Archimède'. In the film's only flashback, motivated by the French youth's memories of his classmate's humiliation and revolt, black and white silent footage shows the young boy becoming the laughing-stock of the class, accompanied by the noise of an imaginary, old film projector. Charef turns the tables on his audience, in that it is the French who have difficulty understanding the Beur-authored joke. Nonetheless, the film's attitude towards a French audience is ambivalent. Whereas the novel is dedicated to Charef's mother, Mebarka, 'even though she cannot read', the film ends with a dedication 'to Jean-Pierre' as the final credits roll. The film, then, though it foregrounds a Beur's story, is aware of its address to the (male) French spectator. Indeed, as far as Farida Belghoul was concerned, the eye of 'big brother' can be felt throughout the film.⁸

The concern with addressing a mixed French audience is translated into the film's structure (as in the novel) through the construction of a variety of subject positions. The narrative

⁸ Farida Belghoul, 'Le Thé au Harem d'Archimède', *Cinématographie*, no. 110 (1985), p. 32.

centres on the adventures of a couple of eighteen-year-olds, Madjid, a Beur (Kader Boukhanef) and Pat, his illiterate French friend (Rémi Martin). However, the loose episodic structure of the narrative, covering a week or so in the lives of people living on the ironically named Flowers Estate, allows other stories to be intercalated, particularly that of Josette (Laure Duthilleul), a single white mother who loses her job and is driven to attempt suicide, and Malika, Madjid's mother (Saïda Bekkouche), who not only holds her own family together, but also provides support for other women on the estate who are unable to cope. (Images of other immigrant families, potentially threatening to a white audience, are noticeably absent, however.)

The film is primarily interested in exploring Madjid's conflicts of identity, torn between the (unrealistic) expectations his mother has of him as an Algerian and his experiences on the streets of Paris with Pat. He is most often seen in the company of Pat and it is through the doubling-up of central protagonists with different ethnic origins, who nevertheless share the same underprivileged background (sordid housing estate, no job, no money, no prospects), that the film is able to provide points of recognition and identification for both a Beur and a French audience. The pleasure in and solidarity of their good-natured, buddy-like friendship is represented through a series of shared experiences, including the crimes they carry out together (stealing, mugging, pimping), and moments of relaxation (drinking, going out with the gang, picking up girls). It is underlined by the sacrifices they make for each other: Madjid walks out on an admittedly boring factory job to join Pat who has been given the sack; and the film ends with a final shot of Pat gazing towards Madjid, the camera taking Madjid's point of view, as he gives himself up to the police to join his friend.

The film's basic message, then, is that there is no fundamental difference between Beur and French youth. They look alike (they are equally attractive, give or take Madjid's slightly darker complexion and black curly hair), they talk and dress alike, and they have the same tastes and the same problems (hence the film's international crossover appeal). Their delinquency is the product, not of their respective racial origins, but rather of their deprived working-class background and the economic crisis. This theme is taken up by the role of the gang within the film, whose members hail from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, but who all live on the same housing estate and are jointly the victims of the violence and aggression expressed by the older generation of white, working-class males. The generation gap is fundamental to an understanding of the social tensions informing the film; in a key scene, the local cinema auditorium becomes the site of youth solidarity, uniting rival gangs in the face of threats from the

Similarities and differences in
 Beur film: *Madjid* (Kader
 Boukhaneff) and *Pat* (Remi
 Martin) in *Tea in the Harem*
 (1985)
 Courtesy: BFI Stills



drunk middle-aged male (French) intruders.

At the same time, the film subtly positions the spectator to sympathize with Pat and Madjid's more reprehensible behaviour, by suggesting that their victims deserve what they get. For example, when they steal a wallet from a passenger on the metro, their victim immediately shows himself to be a racist by accusing Madjid of the theft (whereas it is Pat who has the wallet hidden); when Madjid entices a wealthy-looking gay man to follow him into a park, where he gets mugged by Pat, the victim can be seen as responsible for what happens to him by his treatment of the young Beur as an erotic object; after Madjid feels sorry for Solange, the local lush whom they tout round the immigrant workers' huts for business, she justifies their abuse of her by spending all the money she earns on drink. These sequences are politically as well as morally ambiguous: the film is (perhaps unconsciously) shot through with images of French society as fundamentally corrupt and degraded, images which are at odds with the fact of (and desire for) integration into French society, presented through Madjid's friendship with Pat.

This reading is supported by an analysis of the film's obsessive handling of (hetero)sexuality and sexual difference. Pat and Madjid have a casually sexist attitude to women, which requires constant reinforcement through looking as well as acting. The fascination with the female other, combined with the commodification of the female body, is crystallized in the scene where they instruct the younger boys on the estate in how to treat Mado, the mentally retarded girl who lets them all fuck her. Femininity as both commodity and spectacle is a recurring theme, as in the scene when their former schoolmate Balou

returns to the estate in a Mercedes, with the windows plastered with banknotes and a white French prostitute sitting on the back seat: as the gang surrounds the car and stares in admiration, Balou slowly parts the woman's legs. When Pat and Madjid have money, they go to the rue St Denis to ogle at the prostitutes, or pick up French girls in a discotheque, or go back to the estate to screw Josephine, a local housewife, before her husband gets back from work. With the judicious exceptions of Josette and Madjid's neighbour, Mme Levesque, both of whom are inadequate mothers and the victims of violence perpetrated by Frenchmen, and Anita, the token teenage girl in the gang (who utters occasional objections to the lads' macho behaviour and attitudes), all the Frenchwomen represented in this film turn out to be sexually available 'slags'.

This is particularly shocking in the case of Pat's sister, Chantal, who is set up early in the film as a potential love interest for Madjid (to his mother's despair), but who turns out to be working as a prostitute in Paris. The scene in which Madjid makes this discovery is crucially placed towards the end of the film. Instead of sympathetically acknowledging the similarities between Chantal's situation and his own, Madjid backs away, gets drunk, and abandons any further active role. As a result, when the police catch up with the gang and their stolen car on the beach at Deauville (a location which invites comparison with the ending of Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups*), Madjid is in a state verging on catatonia, and is the only member of the gang to be caught. The development of a love affair, or even simply a friendship, between the Beur youth and the French girl, is shown here to be an illusion. And by implication, so is integration into French society, not so much because of French racism, but rather because the French turn out to be unworthy.

The film's negative coding of what it means to be French is also hinted at through subtle differences between Pat and Madjid. Despite their ostensibly shared attitudes to sex, the film contrives only to show (or hear) Pat having sex, whereas Madjid remains visually 'innocent': partly out of choice (he decides not to go to Josephine's) and partly because of Pat's mischievousness (Pat lands him with the girl from the disco who is having her period!) Their attitudes to others are also significantly different. Pat mocks Madjid's father, whereas Madjid treats him with some sensitivity; Madjid feels sorry for Solange whereas Pat thinks she is putting on an act; Pat loses all interest in the girl with the period, whereas Madjid at least attempts to make conversation; and it is Madjid who helps his mother persuade Josette not to commit suicide. Madjid is also shown to be more intelligent than Pat, who cannot even read. And – very briefly – through the scene in the employment agency, the film allows that he may also be the

victim of his conflicting identities (as an Algerian he is not entitled to a place on a training course to become a mechanic) and of institutionalized racism (he is refused the possibility of work in a driving school because of his allegedly poor eyesight, whereas a dim-looking French youth wearing thick-lensed glasses is ushered into the office). When Pat is given a chance to express his dreams, in a long monologue which takes place on the fateful car drive out of Paris, he reveals that his ultimate fantasy is to go to the Côte d'Azur with Madjid and get picked up by rich women looking for a bit of rough. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that by the end of the film Madjid has opted out of any positive engagement with his surroundings.

Compared with the negative coding of the French community (not just through the female characters, but also through the adult males on the housing estate), the representation of the immigrant family is significantly more positive. The film opens with a sequence in which Josette brings her son Stéphane to Malika to be looked after while she goes to work. The music swells over her journey across the estate into the bosom of the immigrant family, where Malika is to be found dispensing warmth, sustenance and protection to her children and (later) to her husband, who has been reduced to the state of a vegetable as a result of an accident at work. Malika is the only character to maintain a connection with the past, continuing to pray to Mecca on a rug in her bedroom (mimicked by little Stéphane, but not by any of her own children), and listening to the Algerian music going round in her head while her family watches a line of French chorusgirls on the box. At the same time, scenes of her praying, or bathing her husband, position her in her difference through downward-angled shots through doorways seen from the point of view of others (Josette, Madjid). Friction between mother and son erupts each time Madjid returns home. Malika reproaches him for his failure to get a job, his failure to help her in the house and subsequently his drunkenness; but the only prospect she can offer for the future is to send him off to do his military service in Algeria to make him 'a real man'. The rift between them is represented by the breakdown in language, for Malika cannot speak French properly and her son cannot (or will not) understand Arabic, which has to be translated for the audience too by subtitles.

The film thus represents the young Beur's dilemma through the contrasting mise-en-scene and narratives of home and street, Malika and Pat (and Chantal). A brief, awkwardly inserted scene suggests that other, more politically aware identities might be available, when Madjid and Pat drop in on a rehearsal of a rather amateur agitprop play in which the Beur actors protest about Arabs being murdered. But Madjid's trajectory towards

being picked up by the police seems fairly inevitable, and even if the film's rejection of closeup shots, voice over or introspective dialogue means that the character also remains slightly distanced, the spectator is moved to sympathy with his plight. The question of Madjid's identity is left unresolved.

Bâton Rouge

Bâton Rouge was Bouchareb's first feature film, but he had already made four shorts, including *Peut-être la mer* / *Maybe the Sea* which was selected for Cannes in 1983, and worked for the television channel TF1. *Maybe the Sea* is about the unsuccessful attempt by two small boys to plan their 'return' to Algeria, a theme which he was to rework in *Cheb*. He was able to get the *avance sur recettes* for his screenplay for *Bâton Rouge*, largely because of the prior box-office success of Bahloul's *Mint Tea*.

Bâton Rouge, even more than *Mint Tea* and *Tea in the Harem*, plays to a crossover (male) youth audience for whom ethnic difference is represented as unproblematic. It is the story of three friends, one Frenchman (Mozart, played by Jacques Penot) and two Beurs (Karim, played by Hammou Graïa and Abdenour, played by Pierre-Louis Rajot), who dream of travelling to Bâton Rouge in pursuit of the American Dream (inspired by a Mick Jagger song). After a series of sequences set in the suburbs of Paris, introducing the characters, and showing them doing various temporary jobs, a whimsical twist of fate allows the threesome to make their dream come true. The plot follows their adventures in the United States as they journey south to Louisiana. Although they encounter obstacles aplenty, and are forced by lack of money into bumming train rides or stealing from a garage, they also bathe in the warmth of a more tolerant atmosphere than they have come to expect back in France: they get a ride in a bus with a choir of black gospellers and, more importantly, Mozart ends up falling in love with a black singer.

However, the two Beurs eventually discover that there is no place for them in the USA either. Deported back to Paris, and fed up with still doing nothing but temporary work, in another unexpected (and unmotivated) turn of the plot the Beurs, spurred on by Abdenour's little brother, finally get their act together. They form a collective to set up a Burger Bar, together with the people from the queue outside the Employment Agency. The film ends on a freeze frame of a happy well-dressed multiethnic group (rather like a Benetton advertisement) stepping out towards the camera as they set about their new enterprise. It is authenticated by a final credit which reminds the audience that the 'California Burg' in Argenteuil was set up in 1981.

In this film, the young men want to get away from France because it does not offer them decent prospects in terms of employment. There are no direct references to racism as a motivation for their disillusionment (and no references in the film to any other wider political or historical circumstances). Indeed, as in *Tea in the Harem*, their shared tastes in music and fashion bring them together in an address to an international youth market. They are virtually indistinguishable from each other individually (apart from Mozart's blonde hair and saxophone) and the film seems thereby to want to prove that the Beurs are as French as the French. In its mise-en-scene the film repeatedly uses the colours of the tricolour to draw attention to the question of French national identity as its backdrop, while Abdenour manages to convince the American girl visiting Napoleon's tomb that the names Napoleon and Abdenour both come from Corsica. The upbeat ending, with its vision of Beurs finding a positive place in the French economy, remains an open one, leaving the spectator to speculate as to whether or not the project could ever succeed.

Unlike *Tea in the Harem*, *Bâton Rouge* does not offer an alternative emotional centre based in the North African roots of the principal protagonists. All three youths are divorced from their family background, history and religion. All we know about Abdenour is that he has a young brother called Bruno, whom he is trying to prevent being sent to a foster home. Karim has a strict father, an Arab and a factory worker, who wants his son to get a proper job. His fleeting appearances inspire Karim to take action in his life, but his role could be that of any distant reproving parent. Rather than interacting with and rebelling against their parents' generation, the young people in this film are already unproblematically responsible for their own lives. They dream of US culture as an alternative to French culture, but this is shown not to be the answer to their predicament. Instead, they realize they must take their destiny into their own hands and find their place in France's enterprise culture. Not only does the film underline the importance of the slogan used during the demonstrations of the mid-1980s, '*J'y suis, j'y reste*' (I'm here to stay), it provides a reassuring message for French audiences that the Beurs' aspirations are no different from anyone else's.

Although the characters are constructed as unproblematically heterosexual, the film curiously avoids any sex scenes. Karim and Abdenour are allowed to be only mildly flirtatious (and Abdenour's relationship with the tourist lasts only until he meets her puritanical family in the USA). Mozart develops a sexual relationship, indeed a potentially explosive interracial relationship, but it is safely distanced and contained within the more tolerant

and ultimately foreign US setting. The film fails to find a place for the representation of Beur women.

The paradoxical construction of sexy Beur youths, but no sex, in the two films considered so far may be attributed to the desire not to cause offence to a mixed audience, given the precarious state of race relations in France. Sex with French girls would be problematic for French youths, sex with Beur girls would cut French youths out of the scene and also be problematic for the 'immigrant' community. But, more importantly, any form of sexual relationship for the Beur youths (other than through the power relations of casual commodified sex) would risk calling into question their masculine Beur identities, since a French girl would inevitably represent the oppressor, and a liberated 'Beurette' would challenge the traditional distribution of gender roles in an Arabic family. In a world in which the Beurs are trying to make sense of their conflicting identities, the representation of masculinity in these first Beur films remains a last bastion of security.

Miss Mona

Miss Mona, Charef's second film, proceeds to offer a challenge to the masculine heterosexual identity of its protagonists. The film abandons the address to a crossover youth audience, and instead appeals to the audience's fascination with sexual ambiguity (like other French films of the 1980s such as Bertrand Blier's 1986 film *Tenue de soirée*). *Miss Mona* blatantly problematizes issues of sexual identity and spectacle, and the spectacle that is foregrounded is that of male transvestism, announced by the film's garish poster showing Jean Carmet in drag. (It was Jean Carmet who played the infamous racist in Yves Boisset's *Dupont Lajoie* in 1974.)

In *Miss Mona*, the French male transvestites, prostitutes and homosexuals who people the film are viewed in part through the innocent eyes of Samir (Ben Smail), an illegal North African immigrant who in desperation forms a reluctant and uneasy alliance with the ageing Mona (Jean Carmet). Samir is desperate to earn money to send to his family back home and to get a false identity card so that he will not be harrassed by the police. Having lost his job in a ragtrade sweatshop, he is drawn first into prostitution, then into theft and ultimately murder, through aiding and abetting Mona. The film plays on the spectator's voyeurism through scenes which follow Samir's transfixed gaze as he pursues his odyssey towards degradation and despair. The camera withdraws from, and the toilet doors close on, Samir's first homosexual experience; but in the course of another job Mona

gets for him, a naked Samir gazes impassively down through a glass ceiling at the grotesque client who is jerking himself off below; when he is rescued from the police by his partner in that job, he finds himself in a theatre, standing in the wings, peering in fascination through the curtains as the boy performs his striptease for the gay audience (and for us); and when planning the final theft (which leads to murder), the spectator follows Samir and Mona's stare across the road at their victim, Mona's treacherous former lover and a successful transsexual. If *Tea in the Harem* constructed an image of a corrupt and degraded society through its representation of women and working-class, male adults, *Miss Mona* does something similar through the fascinated gaze it directs at transvestites and gays, who form practically all the French males in the film.

The film is regularly punctuated by a narrative strand which at first seems unrelated to the main plot, involving repeated shots of a metro train pulling into station (a heavily phallic marker, and one which opens the film), and glimpses of the train-driver who at the end of the film is made responsible for delivering Samir to the police. The driver turns out to be Jean, Samir's first client, a lonely middle-aged gay who also appears in the gay striptease joint, and who spends much of his spare time looking for an idealized young partner through a dating agency. The significance of his role in the film's ending, however, is ambiguous, and his facial expression offers no guidance. Does he fail to help Samir get away because he simply does not realize what's going on? Or because he is both gay and a racist? Is it an unwitting, or a deliberate, act of betrayal of one oppressed, marginalized individual by another? Whatever reading one opts for, the representation of homosexuality in this film remains negatively coded.

Mona herself, however, is more ambiguously presented. Jean Carmet, in a much admired performance, appears in a series of female disguises: ageing prostitute, gypsy, Marlene Dietrich, housewife, Marilyn Monroe. He even appears at times dressed like a man. We see Samir silently watching him as he puts on his Dietrich outfit; and the scenes where he plies his trade in the Bois de Boulogne are shot from a very high downward angle, producing images reminiscent of security videos. Mona resembles a criminal specimen needing to be kept under observation. Nevertheless, an insert of Mona as Monroe skipping along the pavement suggests that the masquerade brings innocent pleasure, even though it is followed by a scene in which Mona gets stabbed. Samir, and perhaps the audience too, comes to accept Mona for what he says he is, a lonely woman trapped in a man's body longing for a sex-change operation. By the end of the film Samir even helps Mona's childlike senile father, another

transvestite, to put on his lipstick. Despite their 'perversity', Samir, Mona and Mona's father come to constitute a sympathetic alternative family, their intimacy encapsulated in a scene where they picnic in the sun together (and which contrasts strongly with the coldness which characterizes Mona's meeting with his nearly blind, aggressive old mother).

The film builds up to an ironic climax, crosscutting between Mona in his canalside caravan with a bottle of champagne and Samir's forged papers, waiting for Samir's return, and Samir getting caught by the police in a routine check. As with *Madjid* at the end of *Tea in the Harem*, Samir finds himself in the hands of the state, not because of the crimes he has actually committed, but simply for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and the film encourages sympathy for Samir by emphasizing how circumstances have driven him into crime. The film is thus as morally ambiguous as *Tea in the Harem*, but the process of change through circumstances is more clearly documented. The film opens in documentary mode, establishing the wretched situation experienced by immigrants living and working in Paris. In Samir's overcrowded hostel accommodation (located near the ironically-named Europe metro station), a man lies dying, and has to be buried in secret before the night is out. Immigrants are shown as perpetual victims, constantly hounded by the police, in images reminiscent of the 'miserabilism' of first generation cinema of the 1970s. There is no doubt, however, where moral values lie. When Samir in despair tries to go to the mosque, he is too ashamed to enter. He has become corrupted by the corrupt society which surrounds him. He is finally damned when he enjoys a night of pleasure with the young gay dancer (underlining the film's fundamental homophobia), for the boy then robs Mona of his life savings before committing suicide on stage, and it is the need to replace this money which leads to the final crime. Having earlier agreed to act out the stereotype of the menacing violent Arab (his hand on the knife visibly shaking) to frighten one of Mona's clients into handing over his wallet, by the end of the film Samir has become truly violent, battering his victim to death to protect Mona from being recognized. Caught between the values of his Arabic upbringing and the need to care for his family by surviving on the streets of Paris, Samir's identity as an innocent, upright Arab and as a heterosexual male have simultaneously been called into question. But it is the perverse, feminized French who are responsible for his downfall.

Cheb

Cheb is a Franco-Algerian co-production, shot in Algeria with the cooperation of the Algerian army, but not subsequently released

9 Duncan Petrie (ed.), 'Change and cinematic representation in modern Europe', in *Screening Europe*, p. 7.

for exhibition in Algeria. One of the scriptwriters was Abdelkrim Bahloul, director of *Mint Tea*.

Like *Tea in the Harem* and *Bâton Rouge*, *Cheb* seems to be aimed at the youth market once more (*cheb* means youth in Arabic). Its main characters are two attractive young Beurs, Merwan (Mourad Bounaas) and Malika (Mozha Khouadra), who have grown up in Roubaix. There are two fundamental differences from the two earlier films, however. First of all, even though the film is structured around Merwan's expulsion from, and then return to, France, the action of the film is set primarily in Algeria, with a few flashbacks to earlier events in France. Secondly, there is no central white French protagonist to generate interest and recognition for a white French audience. Instead, Merwan struggles alone with his problems for much of the time, and is joined only for the central section of the film by his girlfriend Malika. The isolation of the two Beurs in what is for them too an alien environment manages both to stress what makes them different from a white French audience (the reasons for their presence in Algeria) as well as what makes them the same (their identification with French youth culture). As Duncan Petrie puts it, this is 'an exemplary post-colonial text . . . which asks fundamental questions of identity and belonging'.

The film opens with a montage of documentary footage showing the demolition of high-rise flats, police violence, people in mourning, and political demonstrations against racism foregrounding the slogan '*J'y suis, j'y reste*'. The sequence ends with a shot of a gun being pointed direct to camera, inviting the spectator to share the sense of fear and menace which informs the *Beur* experience of living in France, and so to sympathize with the *Beur* characters. The prologue cuts abruptly to starkly beautiful shots of the desert, before showing Merwan arriving in Algeria and being sent off to the army, having been deported after serving a prison sentence in France for theft. Despite the circumstances of his expulsion, Merwan's main objective is to find some way of returning to France. He himself does not question his identity. The narrative charts his attempts to escape from Algeria, by deserting from the army, traveling across the country with Malika in the hope of getting smuggled across the border, and finally accepting the gift of a French passport from a young man from Nanterre who is trying to get out of doing his military service. The film ends with Merwan back in France, but ironically also back in the army. He has achieved his goal, but the price he has to pay for his French identity (at least temporarily) is the loss of his freedom and his individuality. The name on his uniform is that of his benefactor, Ceccaldi, whose origins can be traced back to an earlier wave of immigrants in France. Merwan

does not join in the singing of the Marseillaise, and the film's ending continues to problematize his fate.

Malika's narrative fate is even less optimistic. Having come to Algeria on a visit to relatives in the hope of seeing Merwan, she discovers that her father has abandoned her with her uncle, removing her (French) passport, leaving her virtually a prisoner. Like Merwan, she is completely westernized. Her physical appearance – sunglasses, trendy clothes, aggressive stare – emphasizes how totally out of place she is. To run away with Merwan, she is obliged to dress like a boy and cut her hair short. The film vividly demonstrates the conflicts between Malika's emancipated ideas about women's roles, and the puritanical and oppressive attitudes to women she experiences in Algeria. Even though she understands some Arabic, Malika insists on speaking French and wants only to return to France. She is aware that if she stays, she is likely to be subjected to an arranged marriage. When she is picked up by the police, her main hope is that Merwan will be able to contact her friends in the *lycée* back home, who can arrange legal help to get her out. However, the last image of Malika, an unmotivated insert punctuating Merwan's train journey back, shows her modestly dressed in traditional costume, her face expressionless. Nightmare or reality? The status of the image is uncertain, as is Malika's future.

As with *Tea in the Harem* and *Bâton Rouge*, the Beurs are unable to turn to their parents for help. Indeed, the rift between the two generations is particularly flagrant in this film. Merwan's parents, seen in flashback at his trial, do nothing to help him, while Malika's father and uncle actively prevent her from leading her own life. What is frightening about their experiences in Algeria is that they have no one to turn to for help. The culture is depicted initially as completely alien, whether it is men in the hostel in Algiers, crowds of Muslims praying in the streets, or country folk throwing stones at the couple when they embrace. Merwan has no understanding of Arabic, and no intention of learning any. He makes no effort to get to know the people or the places, and does not even appreciate the multiethnic 'family' which populates the taxi in which he crosses the desert. The magnificent desert scenery is merely a backdrop to his attempts to escape, and the only people he can communicate with are those who have some knowledge of French. The reactionary ideas of his friend in the army, Miloud, merely serve to underline how much Merwan wants to get back to France. Only when Malika has been taken away by the police does Merwan establish contact with a sympathetic Algerian who gives him hospitality, a job and the opportunity to loosen up a little, swapping his jeans for Algerian robes. Indeed, the Algerian constitutes a sympathetic and dignified father substitute (a unique character in these Beur

films), a man who is familiar with the two cultures and remembers the fight for independence. Just as many Beurs in the 1980s sought to rediscover their roots through seeking to understand the experiences of first generation immigrants (exemplified in the 1991 commemoration ceremony of the shameful events of October 1961 when the French authorities rounded up and killed an unknown number of Algerians), so Merwan discovers that his future depends on the assistance of his Algerian benefactor as well as his French one.

In its handling of sexuality and gender, *Cheb* acknowledges the problems of identity experienced by Beurettes as well as by Beur youths. Although there is no sex in the film, this seems to be less to do with preserving the masculinity of the male protagonist, and more to do with emphasizing the importance of choice as opposed to coercion in personal relationships, and in particular the woman's right to define her own identity (the couple spend the night together chastely at Malika's request). Even if this reserve is ultimately governed by a concern not to shock its Arab spectators, the film is unusual in French cinema in featuring a loving friendship based on equality between the sexes. But that, of course, does not necessarily make for a popular film, and it may be that Merwan and Malika, sexy though they are, are simply not sexy enough. Besides, *Cheb* suffers from the same failing as the other films in that Merwan is simply not given enough to say to enable the spectator to penetrate his inner world. Despite, or perhaps because of, a disorienting elliptical style which fragments the narrative, audiences are invited to witness the protagonists' conflicts of identity from a distance, rather than share them.

What do these four films have in common? All are Beur-authored films, directed (if not funded) by filmmakers from France's most prominent (and most abused) ethnic minority group, which succeed in focusing critical and popular attention on the conflicts of identity experienced by individuals on the margins, torn between the need and desire to be accepted in French society and their North African ethnic origins. They each use a predominantly realist aesthetic, combined with features more characteristic of the art movie: episodic, occasionally elliptical narratives with endings that leave questions unanswered, and the expressive use of colour photography. In each case, the central characters lack introspection (through a general lack of closeups, voice over and dialogue) leaving the spectator to interpret and respond to their conflicts of identity through the films' narrative strategies and mise-en-scene.

The male-centred nature of the four films is striking,

particularly in *Miss Mona*, where the only woman character is Mona's aggressive, blind mother. Until *Cheb*, with its introduction of Malika and her problems, the films centre on male protagonists, where questions of identity are very much bound up with sexual identity. Samir's wretched position as an illegal immigrant is exacerbated by the loss of his masculinity as he is forced into homosexual acts which, initially at least, make him sick. In contrast, the central Beur characters (like their white French friends) are heavily marked as young, attractive and heterosexual, even if they are jobless and in crisis (and even if their sex-appeal is not put to the test). They have a universal appeal because they lock into an international, masculine, heterosexual culture of youthful revolt, which elides ethnic differences and which would be jeopardized if their sexual identity were called into question.

Arguably, there are differences between the films which can be related to the political climate in which they were made. *Tea in the Harem* and *Bâton Rouge* take as their starting point a desire for and belief in the possibility of integration through the construction of already well-established friendships between Beur and French youths. Socioeconomic conditions are represented as the principal stumbling block to integration, and cultural differences are marginalized or erased (though less so in *Tea in the Harem*). The films refuse 'miserabilism' and minimize or omit references to racism and the legacy of the Algerian War. Even the representatives of oppressive state institutions are shown as relatively benevolent. The films set out to bridge the gap between Beur and French communities by offering French audiences a non-threatening and non-accusatory representation of ethnic differences. However, *Miss Mona* and *Cheb* place their characters in more life-threatening situations and treat the topic of integration more pessimistically. *Miss Mona* was accused of 'miserabilism', and makes no attempt to minimize the hardships endured by the immigrant population in Paris, while French racism provides the starting point for *Cheb*. Rather than humour a French audience, these films articulate and document the problems of immigrants/Beurs quite explicitly, while at the same time distancing them through exotic locations: in the Parisian underworld and Algeria.

There are also certain similarities and differences to be traced along auteurist lines. Mehdi Charef's films betray both a fascination with and a disgust at aspects of French society. The films' recognizably French settings (the deprived rundown housing estate, the crime and vice-ridden inner city), even given the occasional use of arty photography, are depressing; and there is a nostalgia in both films for Arab culture as the site of positive values. As a result his films are fundamentally ambivalent, since

the conflicts of identity which face his protagonists are virtually impossible to resolve. Madjid's trajectory leads to complete passivity, Samir's to degradation and murder: the endings in which they get picked up by the police have a certain ironic inevitability. Bouchareb's films on the other hand, despite being set either in the United States or in Algeria for most of the narrative duration, serve to demonstrate quite forcibly that the Beurs' rightful place is back in France. They are more optimistic than Charef's films in that they present characters who are on the move, and who take initiatives to improve their situation. However, whereas *Bâton Rouge* ends on a mood of multiethnic celebration, having suppressed cultural difference as an issue, *Cheb* seems to have regressed to a position of having to plead the case for integration, and is less convinced that it can be achieved. At the same time, although the importance of the Algerian background is initially denied, the film finally hints that a dialogue between the Beurs and their Algerian forefathers may be possible.

This analysis suggests that the four Beur-authored films are problematic above all in that, given the structure of French cinema and the composition of the French cinema audience, they address a French (or crossover) audience rather than a Beur audience (unlike some of the earlier shorts and documentaries produced by and for the Beur community). Even though the two later films may create spectator positions which are slightly unsettling for the French (losing in popularity as a result), only *Bâton Rouge* can be considered empowering for the Beurs, and then through a highly artificial ending and at the expense of suppressing cultural difference. The films do not challenge the processes of cinematic representation, and are curiously limited in the range of representations they offer. Their protagonists still inhabit a world of delinquents and victims on the margins of society, even if the films demystify the processes by which people come to assume (and in the case of *Bâton Rouge* reject) those identities. Despite the notable successes of many Beurs in moving into higher education, the arts, politics and business, the films lack narratives invoking characters in these positions (male and female), and also marginalize the representation of first generation immigrants and Moslems. Given the small number of Beur-authored films to have been made to date, these few take on the function of representing the Beurs in general, and there remains a gaping need for more pluralistic representations of Beurs in terms of both sexual and cultural difference. At the moment, the term Beur cinema serves as a sop to the liberal-critical conscience rather than as a productive category for a transgressive political cinema which would call French identity, as well as Beur identity, into question.

Gérard Depardieu: The axiom of contemporary French cinema

GINETTE VINCEDEAU

- 1 Ian Lucas, 'A profile of the outrageous Gérard Depardieu', *Women on Top*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1992).
- 2 Select Depardieu bibliography:
In French: Robert Chazal, *Gérard Depardieu, L'Autodidacte Inspiré* (Paris: Hatier, 1982); Christian Gonzalez, *Gérard Depardieu* (Paris: Editig, 1985); Gérard Depardieu, *Lettres volées*, ed. Olivier Dazat (Paris: J-C Lattes, 1988); Olivier Dazat, *Gérard Depardieu* (Paris: Seghers, 1988). **In English:** Molly Haskell, 'You Gérard, Me Jane', *Film Comment*, March/April 1978, p. 23; Bill Marshall, 'Stars: Deneuve and Depardieu, aspects of class and gender' in J. Bridgford (ed.) *France: Image and Identity* (Newcastle Polytechnic papers, 1987), pp. 234–51; Marianne Gray, *Depardieu: A Biography* (London: Warner Books, 1991); Ginette Vincendeau, 'Gérard Depardieu', *International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers 3* (Detroit and London: St James Press, 1992), pp. 286–87.

Gérard Depardieu has achieved global stardom on an unprecedented scale for a French film star. He is as wellknown to *cinéphiles* as Jean Gabin in the 1930s, and is as much an international icon of Frenchness as Maurice Chevalier used to be, especially since *Green Card* (1990). While reviewers routinely joke that it is hard to see a French film without him in it, his fame has percolated to all corners of popular culture, from *Hello!* magazine (Gérard pruning his vines) to soft porn magazines (Gérard as 'French boeuf-cake').¹ At home, Depardieu is even more ubiquitous, mounting stage productions and rescuing the films of John Cassavetes, all the while starring in auteur films, low-key mainstream comedies, and major cultural blockbusters alike (*Sous le soleil de Satan* [1987], *Mon père ce héros* [1992], *Cyrano de Bergerac* [1990], to take just one example in each category). That Depardieu has stupefying energy is clear to all; that he has outstanding talent and versatility as a performer is obvious to most. But these assets are only preconditions for such immense stardom. The purpose of this paper is to try and account for Depardieu's exceptional status and key role in contemporary French cinema.

Depardieu's large filmography (over seventy films in twenty years) precludes here a complete overview of his 'star persona' or career, which are in any case already well documented.² On the other hand, despite such a plethora of films and Depardieu's much vaunted versatility, evidenced by the diversity of his roles, there are key aspects of his screen image which display coherence

³ In particular Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI, 1979); see also John Ellis, 'Stars as a cinematic phenomenon' in *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: RKP, 1982); Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: Macmillan, 1987); Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).

and continuity. In other words, I consider Depardieu as a 'star' in the sense defined in Anglo-American film studies,³ as a performer who has evolved a recognizable image primarily in film parts, but also from other media texts (including elements of his private life), and who both crystallizes and projects cultural and social values. I am particularly interested in how Depardieu functions within, and to some extent defines, contemporary French cinema, given that he is also a star in the sense of commanding substantial economic power. My contention will be that Depardieu's cross-generic and 'cross-gender' star persona is a summing up of key aspects of French male stardom, a condensation of the recent history of French cinema, and evidence of a strategic understanding of the new role of stars in French cinema's present shifting economy.

Male stardom in postwar French cinema: the comic imperative

It might come as a surprise that all top ten stars at the French box office since 1956 are men; in ranking order over the whole period:

1. Louis de Funès
2. Bourvil
3. Jean-Paul Belmondo
4. Jean Gabin
5. Fernandel
6. Alain Delon
7. Lino Ventura
8. Gérard Depardieu
9. Jean Marais
10. Bernard Blier⁴

(These figures are cumulative: Depardieu became number 1 in 1985.) Perhaps even more surprising is that major female stars such as Brigitte Bardot, Catherine Deneuve and Isabelle Adjani are a long way behind their male counterparts in box-office terms.⁵

When asked about this imbalance, Depardieu points to the misogyny of French cinema and its drive for 'young flesh' which shortens women's careers while male actors can go on starring into middle and old age.⁶ But there are also specific generic patterns which further explain this phenomenon, all the more remarkable because of the absence of action genres in French cinema compared with Hollywood. In the 1930s, while populist films privileged alienated male proletarians (archetypally played by Gabin), the bulk of popular cinema relied on comic male stars like Georges Milton, Bach, Fernandel and Raimu. Additionally,

⁴ *Studio Magazine*, November 1992, p. 99.

⁵ For example, the highest cumulative box-office for a Bardot film (*La Verité*, 1960) was 5.6m spectators compared to de Funès and Bourvil's *La Grande vadrouille* (1966) which was 17m. The highest cumulative box-office for a female star in a French film is for Sylvia Kristel (*Emmanuelle*, 1974) at 8.9m: *Le Film français*, 22 August 1984.

⁶ Gérard Depardieu, interview with Serge Daney and Danièle Dubroux, *Cahiers du cinéma*, May 1981, p. 114.

The dominance of male stars
at the French box office:
Depardieu and Yves Montand
in *Jean de Florette* (1986)



7 As I have developed elsewhere:
see Ginette Vincendeau, 'Daddy's
Girls, Oedipal Narratives in
French Cinema of the 1930s',
Iris, January 1989, pp. 71–81
and 'The Fathers and the
Daughters of French Cinema',
Sight and Sound, March 1992,
pp. 14–17.

though melodrama normally favours women, French melodramatic narratives celebrate father figures⁷ and thus have traditionally privileged mature male actors such as Raimu, Harry Baur, Charles Vanel, Jean Gabin and Yves Montand; a pattern in which Depardieu is now beginning to insert himself. In the 1950s, costume dramas and sophisticated comedies gave more space to female stars like Martine Carol, Danielle Darrieux, Micheline Presle and Bardot, but the top star was Gérard Philipe. Depardieu's screen ubiquity can be seen, first of all, within this French generic/casting pattern.

What the chart above also says is that to be popular, a French male star has to work in comedy. The names on the list are either of pure comic actors (like de Funès, Bourvil, Fernandel, Galabru, and Richard), or their range includes a large comic component (Blier, Depardieu and Belmondo), or some comic component (Gabin, Montand, Ventura, Delon and Marais) which is often responsible for their presence in the major league. While the French critical pantheon consists of avant-garde and dramatic auteur films, the stars' popularity charts show that comedy has been the mainstay of French cinema, responsible as much as state subsidies for the survival of the French film industry. Even though the end of the popular 'family comedy' is regularly predicted, the record-breaking French film hit of the first half of 1993 is yet again a comedy, *Les Visiteurs*.

Comedy has consistently functioned as training ground or rite of passage for most French male stars, even those who are best known for their (melo)dramatic repertoire, such as Gabin and Montand, and indeed Depardieu, among whose biggest box-office

⁸ Two of which were among the numerous Franco-US remakes of the 1980s: *La Chèvre* as *Pure Luck* (1991) and *Les Fugitifs* as *Three Fugitives* (1988).

⁹ Françoise Audé, 'Gentillesse et complaisance dans les comédies françaises', unpublished paper, Popular European Cinema Conference, University of Warwick, September 1989.

hits, alongside *Jean de Florette* (1986) and *Cyrano de Bergerac*, are his three comedies directed by Francis Veber and co-starring Pierre Richard: *La Chèvre* (1981), *Les Compères* (1983), and *Les Fugitifs* (1986).⁸ The importance of comedy in relation to male stars goes beyond casting. In French comedy, stars establish and perpetuate signs of a social identity. Despite the common critical charge that mainstream French comedy is purely escapist, one of its characteristics is its grounding in the social fabric of France, with consequences for gendered stardom. For whereas popular French female stars have only been able to develop sexual types (Musidora 'the vamp', Viviane Romance 'the bitch', Brigitte Bardot 'the sex kitten', Catherine Deneuve 'the ice maiden'), male stars have had the latitude to create *socially* coded popular types. The derision aimed at social figures or institutions is, to be sure, politically limited, which is why French comedy is often criticized for being 'too nice'.⁹ However, major French comic types, as embodied by stars, evolved at focal points of social change or unease. For instance, Fernandel in the 1930s epitomized incompetent soldiery in the *comique troupier* films when the competence of the French army was severely in question (but when to challenge it in 'serious' film was impossible because of censorship). Bourvil in the 1950s and 1960s popularized the country bumpkin in Paris, against the background of major population shifts from the country to large cities. Thirty years after the first film in the de Funès *gendarme* series, *Le Gendarme de St Tropez* (1964), real gendarmes in St Tropez complain of interference in their daily work from tourists seeking latter-day 'Louis de Funès'. Comic stars like de Funès, Bourvil and Fernandel, through comic performance of social types, offered the audience a fantasized negative national identity in a carnivalesque world of social and sexual regression and excess permitted by the genre – excess channelled through the body (de Funès' gesticulating and grimacing, Fernandel's horse-like laugh, Bourvil's 'village idiot' expression) but set within the recognizable everyday world, and ultimately redeemed and valorized by the charisma of the stars.

Depardieu's comic persona – his least known outside France – right from the start combined a burlesque use of his body with a specific social identity, which I will summarize as the 'comic *loubard*' (a *loubard* is a proletarian petty hoodlum from city suburbs). Partly predicated on wellknown aspects of his early life in proletarian Châteauroux (a small city in central France), Depardieu's comic *loubard* is defined in performance terms by an aggressive, and yet agile, display of his massive, thickset body. Shots emphasize his heavy, flatfooted walk and swaggering shoulders. Frequent flipping of the head highlights longish, lanky (sometimes greasy) hair; an insolent turn of voice and laugh are

¹⁰ I am drawing here on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the 'proletarian body' in *La Distinction: critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: les Editions de Minuit, 1979). In English: *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: RKP, 1984).

punctuated by a belligerent jutting chin which, with an irregular boxer's nose, goes to compose a 'tough' face. Depardieu's bodily persona is also one which, in comic as in dramatic mode, links a class identity (shape, gestures, voice)¹⁰ to overt sexual display. Epitomized in *Les Valseuses* (1973) – where, for instance, a scene in which he is confronted by a supermarket manager capitalizes on the nimble choreography of his gestures, inherited from stage experience – this persona is found right from the beginning of his career in small parts, in films like *Le Tueur* (1971) and *L'Affaire Dominici* (1972) and, later, others such as *Inspecteur La Bavure* (1980) and *Les Fugitifs*. Depardieu's comic *loubard* evolved along two parallel axes: social and sexual.



The comic *loubard* confronts the older generation: Depardieu and Marco Perrin in *Les Valseuses* (1973). Courtesy: Gala/BFI Stills.

The social axis fused a sociocultural climate; the post-1968 libertarian ethos, with new trends in comic performance, crystallized in the emergence of *café-théâtre*. Working from small Parisian theatres doubling up as cafes, of which the most famous were the *Café de la Gare*, and the *Splendid*, the writers and performers of *café-théâtre* deployed a humorous, 'alternative' attack on the French establishment based on the 1968-inspired sexual 'revolution', and the new cultural identity of the youth generation (though they also had antecedents in the French music-hall and satirical cabaret). They were against 'the system' represented by the rightwing regimes of Georges Pompidou and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and, more pervasively, the older generations. *Café-théâtre* performers have gone on to sustain modern French film comedy, as performers (Coluche, Miou-Miou, Patrick Dewaere, Josiane Balasko, Michel Blanc, Gérard Jugnot,

¹¹ For a view of *Les Valseuses* as part of the Blier canon, see Jill Forbes, *The Cinema in France after the New Wave* (London: BFI/Macmillan, 1992), ch. 7.

¹² Bourdieu, *La Distinction*.

¹³ Gérard Depardieu, interview in *Cahiers du cinéma*, May 1981, p. 114 and interview with Serge Toubiana, *Cahiers du cinéma*, December 1986, p. 35.

Thierry Lhermitte, Dominique Lavanant, Christian Clavier) or writers/directors like Patrice Leconte, Balasko and Jugnot. Even though he was not initially involved directly in *café-théâtre*, Depardieu's comic *loubard* fitted well with its ethos in the 1970s. In *Les Valseuses*, a key film in Depardieu's career,¹¹ strongly influenced by *café-théâtre* comedy, Depardieu and Patrick Dewaere go on a picaresque trail through France, encountering women in a series of scenes which exemplify both the misogyny of Blier as an auteur and the limitations of libertarianism as far as women are concerned. But the Depardieu character's main function is to lead the pair of young men into comic confrontations with male middle-aged representatives of the social order: a hairdresser, a supermarket supervisor, a doctor, a farmer, middle-class parents. These confrontations make sense visually as well as linguistically. As his opponents wear suits and ties or the uniforms of their status, Depardieu exhibits both his *loubard*'s 'class body'¹² described above, and the 1970s sartorial signs of male youth dissent: long hair, flared trousers and a leather jacket. *Les Valseuses*, in line with the new naturalism of 1970s French cinema brought by the cultural change of May 1968 and the semi-improvizational performance style of the *café théâtre*, also makes widespread use of slang in its dialogue. The perceived closeness at that point of Depardieu the star to Depardieu the man, in terms of class origins, added the value of authenticity to what in fact was becoming the new orthodoxy in French cinematic performance styles.

Les Valseuses built on elements of the comic *loubard* persona already present in previous films. It made them cohere in a particularly successful way, fixing this persona so that from then on, despite Depardieu's versatility and his avowed desire to 'escape [his] *Les Valseuses* image',¹³ subsequent films can be seen as declensions on it, whether they be reinforcement, allusion, or denial. This continuity has to do with his physique and performance as well as with the nature of the *loubard* image. In the fitness obsessed 1980s and 1990s, Depardieu's refusal to conform to the slim ideal 'speaks' a proletarian identity: hearty food and red wine rather than bourgeois *nouvelle cuisine*. This identity is all the more powerful in that it is a slippery *populist* concept, rather than a rigorously class-defined one. The position of the *loubard* is one of marginality and opposition combined with criminality; it evoked class rebellion in the context of the 1970s but can equally be put to the service of a diffuse notion of 'authentic' popular roots, hence Depardieu's later reclamation of 'the land' as mythical site of origin, both on and off screen. The marginality of the *loubard* also allows Depardieu (again, on and off screen) social mobility while hanging on to the 'ordinariness' of the popular; a familiar trajectory with stars. Thus in later

comedies such as the Veber-Richard trilogy, while the Depardieu characters are varied in terms of occupation, the *loubard* image of the star is still at their core, especially on the level of performance. In *Les Fugitifs*, Depardieu plays an ex-convict determined to go straight, who accidentally gets embroiled in a bank robbery (botched by Pierre Richard). When he comes out of the bank as Richard's hostage, he is automatically assumed to be the criminal. Humour partly derives from the contrast between character definition and star performance signs, in which the latter always win. In *Les Compères*, Depardieu is a journalist who accidentally gets involved in finding Pierre Richard's (and possibly his own) son, but again, it is his behaviour as a 'heavy', similar to that of his detective character in *La Chèvre*, which gets results; a behaviour predicated on his *loubard* image, over and above the narrative definition of his character.

The sexual axis of Depardieu's comic *loubard* image, as with his comic predecessors, involves a play on regression and emasculation, in which his body and performance provide the 'evidence' of heterosexual virility (implied in the social image of the *loubard*) against narrative attempts to undermine it. Thus many Depardieu comedies hinge on his physical maiming and/or symbolic emasculation. In one of the funniest scenes in *Inspecteur La Bavure* (in which Coluche plays the eponymous bumbling policeman), Depardieu is in hospital, bandaged, groaning in frustration as a woman (Dominique Lavanant) calls him 'impotent' on television, although he is, in fact, a notorious womanizing criminal. In *Les Fugitifs* he is shot in the thigh by Pierre Richard, and terrified to find that he is being operated on by a vet (Jean Carmet). *Les Valseuses* and *Tenue de soirée* (1986, also directed by Blier) most explicitly exploit this feature of the Depardieu comic persona. In both films, in which Depardieu forces sex on another man, humour is derived from the contrast between the narrative event of a homosexual encounter – predicated on the homophobic assumption that to be gay is funny in itself – and the star persona affirming heterosexual masculinity. It is also the case that homosexuality is equated with sodomy and conceived as aggression against, and humiliation for, the 'passive' man.¹⁴ This is understated in *Les Valseuses*, but systematically exploited in *Tenue de soirée*, for example in the 'seduction' of Michel Blanc in which Depardieu parades his 'beefcake' body in leopardskin pants, and the ending with both men in drag. Ultimately, Depardieu's representation of heterosexual masculinity is shored up in these comedies by his consistent teaming with a man who is (in terms of character and star image) less socially skilled, less physically competent, and less attractive to women: Patrick Dewaere in *Les Valseuses*; Coluche in *Inspecteur La Bavure*; Pierre Richard in *La Chèvre*,

¹⁴ See Bill Marshall, 'Stars: Deneuve and Depardieu', p. 241.

Is Gerard Depardieu a woman? Depardieu (left) with Michel Blanc and Miou-Miou (right) in *Tenue de soirée* (1986)
 Courtesy: Sygma/BFI Stills.



Les Compères and *Les Fugitifs*; Michel Blanc in *Tenue de soirée*.

The popularity in France of Depardieu's comic portrayal of masculinity, especially in its combination of sexual explicitness and misogyny, can be partly explained by its intertexts in other forms of French popular culture. There are literary antecedents, going back to Rabelais, in which male-oriented sexuality is at the core of the carnivalesque world. In the cinema, the post-1968 era of diminished censorship made sexual visual display and verbal explicitness possible (leading to the explosion of porn films). Such display also became a core element of contemporary French strip cartoons; some of them, like those of Reiser and Wolinski, explicitly leftwing. Another reference point to the Depardieu comic-sexual persona (especially in the Blier films, but also in the strange war-time comedy *René La Canne*, 1976) are the immensely successful comic thrillers of Frédéric Dard, published since the 1950s under the name of San Antonio. Couched in obscene slang, the San Antonio novels relentlessly foreground male sexuality through a central comic pair: a handsome stud (San Antonio) and his grotesque side-kick (Bérurier) of whom, in a way, Depardieu's comic *loubard* is a fusion.

As Depardieu reaches middle age the comic *loubard* persona, predominantly a young image, inevitably fades, though in the late 1980s/early 1990s it is still present in comedies in which an attenuated form of rebellion, now more often put to the service of anarchic rightwing narratives, is bound up with his comic character, for example in *Uranus* and *Merci la vie* (both 1991). In parallel to this comic strand, and right from the start of his career, Depardieu built on the flip side of that comic persona, evolving a 'tragic' *loubard*, crystallized in Maurice Pialat's *Loulou*

(1980) and pastiched in Jean-Jacques Beineix's *La Lune dans le caniveau* (1982): a masculine figure of marginality but also of suffering and strong erotic appeal, crucial to an important strand of French auteur cinema.

Auteur cinema's suffering macho man

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Fernandel, de Funès and Bourvil offered French audiences variations on masculinity as incompetence and lack of control (though ultimately saved by cunning), while Belmondo and Delon incarnated the opposite, a valorizing portrayal of virile control and strength; Belmondo with stunts and Delon through his laconic, minimalist gangsters or *flics*. These contrasting versions of masculinity echoed the polarized genre structure of French popular cinema of that period. But from the 1970s, French cinema witnessed a significant narrowing of its popular base which affected both genre and stardom. While de Funès, Fernandel and Bourvil could sustain their stardom within popular genres to the end of their lives, this became increasingly difficult, as Delon and Belmondo's waning careers now show. Though the need remains (for men) to feature in domestic comedies, a precondition of major stardom in France since the mid-1970s is the ability to straddle popular genres and auteur cinema, the latter providing added cultural legitimacy, but also the necessary extra audience and media exposure via festivals, chat shows and award ceremonies. This is clearly the career path chosen by the prize-covered Depardieu,¹⁵ who has on several occasions emphasized his desire for a 'wider audience base'.¹⁶ In terms of his star image, this translated into the development, alongside his comic male heroes, of their reverse mirror image, that of a 'tragic' persona, originally in the *loubard* mode; a depiction of masculinity in crisis.

From the beginning of his career, when alongside mainstream films such as *Le Tueur* or *L'Affaire Dominici*, Depardieu appeared in Marguerite Duras' *Nathalie Granger* (1972), he has pursued an active career in auteur cinema. As with his work in comedy, there has, inevitably, been an evolution in both the types of parts he has played (if only because of the twenty-year span), and also, more importantly in the context of auteur cinema, in his status vis-a-vis the directors of his films. Whilst Duras cast an unknown in *Nathalie Granger*, by the time of *Le Camion* (1977), she was using a 'recognizable icon'.¹⁷ By the 1980s, and especially after 1986, the 'miracle Depardieu year'¹⁸ with the triple triumph of *Les Fugitifs*, *Jean de Florette* and *Tenue de soirée*, Depardieu, by his presence (as well as his co-producing), could single-handedly ensure the making of a first

¹⁵ See Marianne Gray, *Depardieu: A Biography*, p. 203, for a list of Depardieu's awards.

¹⁶ Depardieu interview, *Cahiers du cinéma*, May 1981, p. 35.

¹⁷ Leslie Hill, *Marguerite Duras, Apocalyptic Desires* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 16.

¹⁸ Serge Toubiana, *Cahiers du cinéma*, December 1986.

The suffering macho of auteur cinema: Depardieu (with Isabelle Huppert) in *Loulou* (1980)
 Courtesy: Artificial Eye/BFI
 Stills.



¹⁹ Like Robert de Niro, Depardieu has also used his body as an instrument of change, widely publicizing the fact of deliberately losing weight to fit the image of a part (*Fort Saganne* for example) or putting it on (*Tenue de soirée*).

film by an unknown director, such as François Dupeyron's *Drôle d'endroit pour une rencontre* (1988). But despite such changes in age and status, and despite the differences between the individual aesthetic or ideological projects of each auteur (such differences being, after all, the *raison d'être* of auteur cinema) Depardieu's star persona in auteur films again shows a traceable, coherent identity. His presence in the films of a range of very distinct directors – from Duras to Blier, Resnais to Sautet, or Pialat to (recently) Godard, to name the most prominent – is traditionally ascribed to his versatility, a rhetoric common to many stars who wish to emphasize their performance skills and avoid the charge that they are 'playing themselves'.¹⁹ Depardieu's continued presence in auteur films points to the coherence and especially the *suitability* of his star image for post-1970 French auteur cinema. Whereas new wave directors in the 1950s and early 1960s

20 Arts, 29 April 1959.

21 This is a point I develop in relation to Jean Gabin in 'Community, nostalgia and the spectacle of masculinity', *Screen*, vol. 26, no. 6 (1985), pp. 18–39, and in greater depth in Claude Gauteur and Ginette Vincendeau, *Jean Gabin: Anatomie d'un mythe* (Paris: Nathan Université, 1993).

22 'You are a classy and bourgeois idol; I am the son of a peasant with strong hands', Gérard Depardieu to Catherine Deneuve, *Lettres volées*, p. 122.

rejected mainstream stars, preferring for economic and aesthetic reasons to create their alternative 'star system', the auteurs of the 1970s and 1980s have been queuing up for Depardieu. Truffaut, for instance, who had declared in 1959 that he would never use stars like Gabin, Fernandel or Michèle Morgan because 'they are dangerous artists who make decisions on the script or change it if they don't like it',²⁰ featured Depardieu – who certainly would have been in a position to do so – in *Le Dernier métro* (1980) and *La Femme d'à côté* (1981). Economic viability is obviously crucial here. Just as mainstream French stars now need auteur cinema, auteur cinema needs *them* in a way it did not in the 1950s and 1960s. But the specificities of Depardieu's dramatic image are also a key factor to the aesthetic project of French auteur cinema, in particular his romanticism of suffering and his play on sexual ambiguity.

I will summarize Depardieu's dramatic star persona as that of the 'suffering macho', a figure who both affirms excessive virility (especially through performance) to a misogynistic degree, and simultaneously presents it as in crisis, a crisis sometimes channelled through criminality. The intense, suffering male hero, has a long history in French culture and cinema, and Depardieu has predecessors here too, from Gabin to Montand, especially in his juxtaposition of proletarianness and criminality.²¹ The postwar French auteur cinema inherited this structure, though the new wave often turned the melodramatic patriarch of the classical cinema into the romantically anxious young man, portrayed by Jean-Pierre Léaud or the early Belmondo. Depardieu inserted himself into this pattern, while providing the added value of class authenticity, necessary in the context of the more naturalistic 1970s. Key texts include Claude Sautet's *Vincent, François, Paul et les autres* (1974) in which Depardieu figures in a minor role as a young boxer and symbolic 'heir' to the group of troubled patriarchs (Montand, Serge Reggiani and Michel Piccoli), and especially *Loulou* (1980). The latter film crystallized the early Depardieu 'suffering macho' in such an acute form (in the same way as *Les Valseuses* epitomized the comic *loubard*) that it is worth examining in detail. For a start, *Loulou* is not an innocent title: as well as being a working-class male nickname (usually short for Louis), it echoes the word *loubard*. Pialat's film depicts the meeting of a proletarian delinquent (Depardieu) with a middle-class woman (Isabelle Huppert). This gender/class encounter is pursued in various forms throughout Depardieu's career, for instance with Catherine Deneuve in *Le Dernier métro*, described by Depardieu as the meeting of a 'peasant' with a 'bourgeoise',²² and again with Deneuve in *Fort Saganne* (1983). Though the narrative line of *Loulou* inadequately describes the film, which is more concerned with the raw, semi-vérité depiction

23 Depardieu, *Lettres volées*.

24 André Bazin, 'The destiny of Jean Gabin', in Mary Lea Bandy (ed.), *Rediscovering French Film* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1983), pp. 123–24.

of his milieu through a series of disjointed scenes, it roughly follows the course of the two protagonists' strong sexual attraction, leading her to leave her middle-class husband. She becomes pregnant and has an abortion and the film ends on the uncertain future of their relationship.

Loulou's depiction of tormented masculinity through the Depardieu character is both romantically 'existential' (he is devastated at the loss of his prospective fatherhood) and classbound: for instance the film clearly embeds his violence in his milieu. The general discontent of his character is not shown to result from class awareness in any direct political sense, but nevertheless his milieu injects authenticity into his alienation. In the same way, it is no accident that in the preface to Depardieu's autobiographical *Lettres volées* (a poorly written but interesting reconstruction of his own life, published in 1988),²³ the editor of the 'letters' characterizes Depardieu, alongside his identity as primeval 'caveman', as in a direct line from some of the hallowed heroes of French literature. In particular he singles out Jean Valjean, from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, a key French melodramatic hero whose fate is closely linked to nineteenth century social movement and whose suffering is both individual and a direct result of class oppression.

Loulou/Depardieu is also an object of beauty; not in a traditional, romance-inspired, woman-oriented way (like Gérard Philipe or the young Alain Delon) but in the sense of a fetishized, fantasized class identity. This is the rougher beauty of the 'lower depths', personified by Depardieu's intense physical presence (as with the young Gabin or Montand), his lack of conventional physical beauty adding a further layer of authenticity. In this film, as in other dramas featuring Depardieu, his performance makes use of the bulk of his body as 'metaphysical' weight, with the added intensity of a minimalist acting style (as opposed to movement in comedies). Wearing a leather blouson like the suicidal hero of *Le Jour se lève*, he is another doomed 'Oedipus in a cloth cap',²⁴ even if by 1980 the referential proletariat of this fantasy figure has become increasingly marginalized and Loulou's rapport with his family and community is more oblique. But the mythic strength of this 'doomed' populist hero, partly because of its accumulated layers in French film history, is such that it informs a great many of Depardieu's subsequent roles, and endures through performance continuities. *Fort Saganne*, for instance, casts this figure in a nostalgic light. In a direct reference to the Gabin character of *Gueule d'amour* (Jean Grémillon, 1937), Depardieu plays a Spahi officer of popular origins in the pre-World War I Sahara; of particular erotic attraction, again, to bourgeois women. By virtue of his uniform, as in *Gueule d'amour*, the display of the male

Behind bars: Depardieu and
Sophie Marceau in *Police*
(1985)
Courtesy: Artificial Eye/BFI
Still.



hero as object of desire is emphasized but the desire is also for the fantasy of popular origins which he represents, as it is in *La Lune dans le caniveau*. In Pialat's *Police* (1985) Depardieu is a cop, theoretically on the other side of the tracks from the immigrant working-class milieu he is investigating. It is clear, however, that despite his law-enforcing status *vis-à-vis* clearly oppressed 'deviants', *his* is the focus of angst and suffering, whilst theirs is merely a background. At the end of the film, after the female protagonist Noria (Sophie Marceau) leaves him to return to her milieu (and possible death), the camera lingers on him, not her. In a cinematically overdetermined night scene, the camera follows his silhouette through a Parisian cityscape (a street, a railway bridge), thus expressing his sadness and solitude. Throughout the film he has been shot behind windows, bars and railings. Later, in his home, the camera remains on his vacant face, in a very long take which closes the film, ending on a freeze frame over which classical music is heard. At this point, the star image of the 'suffering macho' clearly exceeds the character.

The French auteur cinema, devoted to forms of (psychological) realism as well as abstract explorations of the human condition, can thus make good use of Depardieu's social-existential 'tragic' persona. In *Mon oncle d'Amérique* (1980), he attempts suicide because of work-related stress, but his anxieties have a wider resonance than that of his white collar job, as shown by Resnais' careful inscription of his character's childhood as a farmer's son and, further, the visual identification created in 'flashes' with the Gabin of the 1930s. Similarly, in *Le Choix des armes* (1981), his

criminality is embedded in his Parisian suburban *loubard* origins. Depardieu's ability to embody such figures of crisis-ridden masculinity, at least up to Pialat's *Sous le soleil de Satan* (in which he plays a tortured priest), is also apt for an auteur cinema which has a stake in exploring 'difficult' characters and unhappiness, if only to distinguish itself from popular genres (and, in the French context especially, comedy). Furthermore, at a time when the status and existence of that cinema itself is felt to be threatened, Depardieu's persona could be seen, and arguably has been used, as a mirror image of a number of auteurs themselves. In this respect, the parallels often drawn between Depardieu and Pialat, or the close relationship between Depardieu and Blier, are telling.

Adding to this complex image is Depardieu's ambivalent depiction of sexuality; another reason for his popularity in auteur cinema which especially values ambiguity. While in many ways Depardieu represents a traditional vision of aggressive French machismo (from *Les Valseuses* to *Uranus*, and *Cyrano de Bergerac*'s swaggering *gascon*), one of the most common descriptions of his screen image as well as his behaviour as a performer (one which has become something of a cliché), is that of his 'femininity': 'a fragile man, with a flaw in his personality, a very feminine character in the end'.²⁵ As director and star of *Tartuffe*, Depardieu made the eponymous character into a camp, sexually ambiguous figure, soft spoken and sporting eye makeup and lipstick. In *Lettres volées*, he extravagantly praises men (including François Mitterand) for their 'feminine side', while his highest compliment for the women he admires, such as Catherine Deneuve, is their 'virile' quality. Beyond the fact that sexual ambivalence and gender-bending are fashionable (and Depardieu was analyzed by Jacques Lacan), what are we to make of such discourses? Is Depardieu's star persona truly evidence of the breaking down of gender boundaries? If so, how does this relate to the misogynistic aspects of his image?

As with other aspects of Depardieu's image examined so far, there are antecedents to his depiction, alongside traditional machismo, of a gentler type of masculinity. In French cinema, masculinity is not traditionally defined as violently opposed to femininity, (as in, say, the American Western) but as incorporating values normally ascribed to femininity, such as gentleness, caring and nurturing. This takes us back to the loving fathers of the French classical cinema or the gentleness expressed by male characters towards each other in male-bonding narratives.²⁶ If we also take into account the high value placed on amorous relations in French culture, we can understand why, as Michèle Sarde argues, French men are perceived (at least in the USA) as 'feminized', if not effeminate.²⁷

²⁵ Depardieu interview, *Cahiers du cinéma*, May 1981, p. 111. Depardieu has made variations on this statement in many contexts.

²⁶ See note 7.

²⁷ Michèle Sarde, *Regard sur les Françaises* (Paris: Stock, 1983), p. 11.

The propensity of male characters in French cinema to evoke suffering may be recast in the light of this alignment with femininity. In Depardieu's case, this takes two forms: victim roles, and the use of performance to evoke 'weakness'. The maiming and symbolic emasculation noted in Depardieu's comedies is equally found in his dramatic roles, most spectacularly in *The Last Woman* (1975), in which he castrates himself with an electric carving knife, as an expression of his impotence in the face of feminism. Other films more subtly position him as a victim, allegorizing fears of sexual/social impotence, for instance in *Mon oncle d'Amérique*, *Danton* (1982), *Le Retour de Martin Guerre* (1981), *Jean de Florette*, *Cyrano de Bergerac*. In performance terms, this is expressed by the frequent impairment of his body (hunchback in *Jean de Florette*, decapitated in *Danton*, sexually impotent at the beginning of *Le Retour de Martin Guerre*), and the effective use of his voice, its softness and subtle modulations providing a contrast to his massive body. The 'feminized' aspect of Depardieu's image also means an overtaking of the traditional topographies of femininity such as domestic spaces, as in *Tenue de soirée*. Many couples at the centre of Depardieu's narratives are formed with another man (from *Les Valseuses* to *Cyrano*), often reconstituting a symbolic male family unit, as in many of the comedies.

Ultimately though, this gender displacement does not lead to changes in either casting patterns or the values associated with femininity and masculinity, left at their most traditional (masculine equals active, feminine equals passive). The occupying of 'feminine' spaces not only leads to the marginalization or expulsion of women from the narratives, but also to a widening of the psychological base of Depardieu's characters, as well as, not negligibly, the number and importance of the parts he can therefore play. In *Mon père ce héros* for instance, he is, like many French male stars before him, both father and 'mother' to his daughter, in the same way as in *Les Compères* and *Les Fugitifs* he and Richard form an all-male parental couple to a child. Such a fantasy of 'completeness' is taken up by both popular and auteur cinema, in many cases not only marginalizing women but also condoning their oppression (from the Blier films to *Tous les matins du monde* [1992]). Here an old pattern is thus brought up to date by Depardieu, since it takes on an added resonance in the context of feminism.²⁸ Additionally, the adoption of 'femininity' adds a layer of sexual aura. Depardieu's stake in repeatedly emphasizing his 'femininity' is that it gives him a surplus of sexiness; his sexual identity is somewhat beyond that of a mere heterosexual man though he is, also, unambiguously that.

The very successful Blier film *Trop belle pour toi* (1989) is a particularly good illustration of Depardieu's adoption of

²⁸ See the argument developed by Tania Modleski in 'Three men and Baby M', *Camera Obscura*, no. 17 (1988).

'femininity', but also of how this serves to erase other differences. He is a garage owner in Marseilles, married to a ravishingly beautiful woman, Florence (Carole Bouquet), who falls in love with his 'homely' secretary, Colette (Josiane Balasko); 'homely' is how the subtitles coyly translate the funnier but more vicious original slang expressions, such as '*tarte*' (lit. tart) or '*boudin*' (lit. black pudding, turd). Though the film is often funny, it is meant to be understood as a serious statement on the amorous condition, underlined by the abundant use of Schubert on the soundtrack. Depardieu, physically at his most massive, fulfils his function as macho stud, as his relation to both women is reduced to sex ('I have never been so well fucked' says Colette). At the same time, he is the locus of suffering, and is finally left by both women. As if we needed confirmation that Depardieu's function as a star is to embody this dichotomy, the film makes Colette say 'He is fragile, underneath his robust appearance'. But the discourse of 'male fragility' also erases that of class power. Through the choice of actresses, beauty and attractiveness are shown as classbound. Carole Bouquet (who, like Deneuve, advertises high-class cosmetics) is the image of *grand-bourgeois* beauty, while Josiane Balasko (a comic actress and filmmaker from the *café-théâtre* tradition) that of proletarianness. But if she is shown to be attractive because of this proletarianness, the film at the same time puts her down for being so, for instance through the language used to describe her. Depardieu, on the other hand, through his accumulated image from the past, can encompass this proletarianness (She is the sister I never had', he says of Colette), and transcend it, through the 'tragic' image of his suffering. His proletarianness is attractive to the bourgeois woman (as in past examples already mentioned, such as *Le Dernier métro*) without being condemned or belittled.

Finally, as the international success of *Trop belle pour toi* shows, Depardieu's ambivalent sexual depictions also bring up to date the international cliché of the Frenchman both as bearer of 'earthy' virility and as 'feminized' through association with romance and women; something which has not harmed his export value.

²⁹ See John Corner and Sylvia Harvey (eds), *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991); and Andrew Higson, 'Re-presenting the national past: nostalgia and pastiche in the heritage film', in Lester Friedman (ed.), *British Cinema and Thatcherism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 109–129.

The business of heritage: exporting Depardieu

Depardieu reaching middle age in the mid- to late 1980s corresponded to the development of a new type of film in French (and European) cinema, known in France as 'cultural super-productions' and which, in Anglo-American terms, falls mostly within the 'heritage' genre.²⁹ After early examples such as *1900*, *Danton* and *Fort Saganne*, the genre really took off, as far

as Depardieu is concerned, with *Jean de Florette*, followed by *Camille Claudel* (1988), *Cyrano de Bergerac* and *Tous les matins du monde* – Depardieu's, and French cinema's, biggest hits of the last few years. Concurrently, a new Depardieu persona seemed to be emerging, bound up with these 'quality' costume dramas and their historical heroes. This is an interesting departure which, in terms of Depardieu's star image in relation to genre, poses the question of his transition from the predominant naturalism of his previous films to the spectacular nature of the heritage movie, and from the 'authenticity' of the *loubard* (comic or tragic) to the obvious 'artificiality' of incarnating historical figures, whether real or fictional (beyond the continuities offered by the body and performance of the star). This is a question that needs to be considered as part of the changing climate of the 1980s French film industry, and in particular the changing role of stars within it.

The 1980s conjuncture of falling audiences and rampant, deregulated television took its toll on the French film industry. While the level of production has been maintained at around 120 films a year, changing patterns of finance have produced a significant rise in film budgets and the emergence of a band of high budget 'super-productions' on which both money and cultural recognition have been lavished. The economic reasons for this phenomenon are complex (see Susan Hayward's article in this issue) and their cultural determinants multiple. Some have argued the nostalgic turn to the past in the heritage film is a general symptom of postmodernism, but it is also clear that in the context of the survival of French (and European) cinema, cultural super-productions are a strategic attempt at marketing cinematic and national specificity. In the face of global 'image culture' (television, advertisements, music videos), one response, as in Hollywood in the 1950s, has been to exploit the spectacular possibilities of the cinema. Hence the accent on high production values, on landscape (*Jean de Florette/Manon des sources*), on decor and costumes (*Cyrano*), on music (*Tous les matins*). This dovetails, in the face of unrelenting competition from Hollywood, with the possibility of promoting French culture, with a celebration of French linguistic, literary, musical and even cinematic heritage, though such promotion takes different forms whether it is received within the culture or outside. As the French reception of *Florette* and *Manon* showed, it was the reference to Pagnol and the era of popular cinema he represents which was appreciated in these films, above the picturesque view of Provence. Outside France, on the other hand, it was the Provençal reference which predominated. The successful French heritage films, therefore, need to offer a Janus-faced vision of French culture, consumable at home as well as abroad, especially

³⁰ Noël Burch and Geneviève Sellier, 'Faire le point', *Lettres Françaises*, May 1991.

³¹ Isabel Desesquels, 'Production: le poids des acteurs', *Le Film français*, 4 September 1992, pp. 15–20.

in the USA. Noël Burch has argued, for example, that the worldwide success of *Cyrano* was based on a misunderstanding:

In France the success of the film was the result of erasing the theatricality of the text, whereas abroad *Cyrano* was sold on the image of the historic values of France . . . Rappeneau became the itinerant ambassador of French culture in the world.³⁰

In my view, Depardieu's success as a star in the French heritage film is based on such a (so far productive) mismatch. I would rephrase Burch's insightful comment to say that abroad, rather than Rappeneau (hitherto unknown), it was Depardieu who became the 'itinerant ambassador of French culture'.

The economic logic which has driven film budgets up has also altered the status of major stars, and thus of Depardieu. While their role in attracting people into the cinema has clearly diminished, their power base has remained. It has, however, shifted and they must now function as guarantee of television and video rentals and sales as well as potential advertising. Major stars have become co-producers, increasingly being paid with a percentage of profits rather than a fee (in order to take advantage of television and video sales).³¹ This has, arguably, contributed to the rise in super-productions, since their very high budgets demand more financial and 'quality' guarantee, which can in turn be accommodated by using more than one star, something the genre is good at: Depardieu and Montand in *Florette/Manon*; Depardieu and Deneuve in *Fort Saganne*; Depardieu and Adjani in *Camille Claudel*; Depardieu and Marielle in *Tous les matins du monde*. In the narrowing generic base of French cinema already evoked, where auteur films are more dependent on the mainstream and where genre boundaries are increasingly blurred, stars can step in, as a bridge between high and low cinematic culture, in an effort to reach a wider audience and give coherence to the national cinema. Heritage films allow them to fulfil this 'middlebrow' function, similar to that of popular literary classics, on which heritage films are indeed often based, for example the forthcoming *Germinal* (1993).

Depardieu reached the era of the heritage film in mid-career, with a star status already exceptionally high. Within the self-consciously high production values of the genre, the fact that his starring roles signify stardom as much as what the characters are about did not, therefore, create a hiatus, and the spectacular aspect of the genre which demands the display of acting skills is well suited to Depardieu's stage training. *Cyrano*, a key text in the French popular classic repertoire (and played by a number of French classic stage actors) may have seemed, on the surface, a long way from Depardieu's image in realist films. It nevertheless

³² Jean-Paul Rappeneau, 'Cyrano – the movie', *Cyrano de Bergerac*, press book (London: Artificial Eye, 1991).

³³ See Ginette Vincendeau, 'Fire and Ice' (on Catherine Deneuve), *Sight and Sound*, April 1993, pp. 20–22.

³⁴ Particularly interesting in this respect is a recent interview in *Interview*, December 1990, pp. 120–124.

structurally echoed his more familiar persona. As Jean-Paul Rappeneau, *Cyrano*'s director put it, 'I picked Gérard Depardieu for the part because I know he can express perfectly both sides of the character: the proud and brilliant personality, alongside the suffering soul',³² a remark which could be equally applied to *Danton* or *Jean de Florette*.

But where the Depardieu persona is perhaps best suited to the heritage genre is in his representation of national identity through historical figures, actual or fictional. Whereas female stars like Catherine Deneuve or Brigitte Bardot have become emblematic figures of an abstract national identity (through their modelling for the effigy of the Republic, Marianne, for instance),³³ male stars like Depardieu can deploy signs of national identity through historical figures, by bringing the symbolic *social* anchorage of his persona to bear on the parts, from *Danton* to *Jean de Florette*. But the subtleties of his sociosexual anchorage are likely to be lost in translation, especially when it comes to films perceived outside France as 'French spectacle' (the 'ambassador' function evoked above) rather than the work of a particular auteur whose existing canon would provide a point of reference. The dichotomy between 'French' and 'foreign' perceptions of French culture are here played across the body and persona of Depardieu. The braggadaccio of the *gascons* in *Cyrano*, for instance, which in the French context is understood as a cliché vision of the men of one area (geographically and historically placed), becomes outside France simply a sign of Frenchness (like Pagnol's inhabitants of Marseilles in his 1930s films). This is what has happened to Depardieu more generally: now an 'icon of Frenchness' erasing class and/or regional differences. As a comparative reading of the French and English-speaking press on Depardieu reveals, the price he has had to pay in order to export successfully is to become a caricature of Frenchness. This came to a head around *Green Card*, both in Depardieu's role in the film, and in the affair surrounding 'revelations' of alleged adolescent sexual violence in Châteauroux, which in turn, may have prevented him from being awarded an Oscar. Anecdotal (and apocryphal) evidence about Depardieu's personal behaviour, particularly relating to food and sex, thus is turned into signs of 'Frenchness';³⁴ in a very Barthesian example of the working of myth, the signified of a particular event (for example drinking red wine) becomes the signifier of 'truth' about a nation. Perhaps this is the fate of all French and European male stars outside their country: to export, they must either erase all signs of cultural difference under a robotic identity (Schwarzenegger, Van Damme) or travesty this identity for outside consumption, like Chevalier in the 1930s and now Gérard Depardieu.

Rupture, continuity and diversification: *Cahiers du cinéma* in the 1980s

CHRIS DARKE

The French film journal *Cahiers du cinéma* celebrated its fortieth anniversary in May 1991 and did so in style, organizing a festival of 142 films at the *Cinémathèque Française*, reissuing back numbers of *Les Cahiers jaunes*¹ and publishing a two-volume history.²

Implicit in the high profile celebrations was the suggestion that *Cahiers* had achieved a comfortable accommodation with its past. Periods as diverse as the glory days of the new wave and the troubled years of Maoist *engagement* seem incorporated into an homogenous narrative while being presented as evidence of the critical heterogeneity characteristic of the journal's forty-year history. What remained concealed in the 1991 celebrations, however, were the travails of the period during which that accommodation can be seen to have been reached, the 1980s.

This article will not attempt an inclusive overview of *Cahiers* in the 1980s. Rather it will consider the decade as one in which the journal can be seen to respond to two particular pressures. The first of these is the definition of its place in the audiovisual environment of 1980s France. The second, which dictates the terms of the first, concerns the journal's concerted attempt to come to terms with its own history, and in particular with the notion of the auteur.

The auteur (*version originale*) comes with a ready set of associations, of time and place, of a cinematic style and a critical

1 So called because of the original yellow cover which *Cahiers* inherited from its predecessor *La Revue du cinéma* and which, as *Cahiers du cinéma*, lasted from the first issue in April 1951 to no. 139 in October 1984.

2 Antoine de Baecque, *Histoire d'une Revue, Tome 1: Les cahiers à l'assaut du cinéma: 1951-1959* and *Tome 2: Cinéma, Tours, Detours: 1959-1991* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1991).

3 Thomas Elsaesser: 'Two decades in another country: Hollywood and the cinephiles' in C. W. E. Bigsby (ed.), *Superculture* (London: Elek, 1975), p. 199.

4 Nicolas Saada on Third Opinion, BBC Radio 3, 9 January 1993. The 'structuralist-militant' phase delineates the period beginning with Jacques Rivette's editorship (June 1963–June 1965) when *Cahiers* extended its critical horizons. This phase reached its apex with the Marxist-Leninist collective editorial policy (October 1968–December 1973) and producing critical work such as the seminal group analysis 'Young Mr Lincoln', *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 223 (September 1970).

5 Jim Hillier (ed.), *Cahiers du cinéma Volume 1: The 1950s, Neo-realism, Hollywood, the New Wave* (London: RKP/BFI, 1985), p. 13.

6 Jill Forbes, *The Cinema in France after the New Wave* (London: BFI/Macmillan, 1992) goes some way to rectifying this critical lacuna.

parti-pris. The Parisian cinephilia of the late 1950s/early 1960s and auteur criticism – with mise-en-scene as its privileged hermeneutic – are collapsed into what Thomas Elsaesser has described as 'the brilliant public relations stunt that came to be known as *Cahiers du cinéma* and *nouvelle vague*',³ whereby the magazine is perceived as having been virtually the house journal of the cinematic 'movement'. The auteur – first as '*politique*', later as Sarissian 'theory' – remains the concept pre-eminently associated with *Cahiers* and the one to have been most thoroughly integrated into critical discourse. In short, to have proved exportable. However, from a British vantage point at least, and in comparison with past decades, the 1980s have been the decade of *Cahiers*' relative critical invisibility.

In a recent British radio broadcast *Cahiers* contributor Nicolas Saada lamented the fact that, outside France, *Cahiers*' critical profile was one that had remained fixed in the past. The relatively ahistorical synthesis of ideas from *Les Cahiers jaunes* and the structuralist-militant phase of the mid-1960s/early 1970s that Saada had encountered in the USA and Japan was, he suggested, a misrepresentation of *Cahiers* nowadays. The present editorial team had either left those positions behind or reconstituted them to correspond to new times.⁴ The comparative 'exportability' of *Cahiers*' ideas across its various phases can be seen to have depended on two decisive factors: cinematic and academic.

Writing about the new wave, Jim Hillier has stated that:

. . . the success of the *Cahiers* critics as filmmakers was vital to the wider circulation of their critical values and tastes, particularly outside France. . .⁵

In making the transition from criticism to directing, Truffaut, Godard, et al established a practice that was to become a traditional element of *Cahiers*' international profile. This transition is no less true of the 1980s: the crucial difference, however, has been one of visibility. The new wave films received wide distribution and have remained in constant circulation. In contrast, the names of the post-new wave, *Cahiers*-associated directors such as Phillipe Garrel, André Techine, Luc Moulet, let alone younger names like Arnaud Desplechin, Olivier Assayas and Danielle Dubroux, mean little to Anglo-American audiences.⁶

If *Cahiers*' relative invisibility in the 1980s can be partly attributed to the low profile of contemporary *Cahiers* auteurs – the 'cinematic factor' of *Cahiers*' exportability – then the 'academic factor', that has served in the past to disseminate and develop its critical positions, also appears to have diminished in

- 7 See: Jim Hillier (ed.), *Cahiers du cinéma Volume 1* and *Cahiers du cinéma Volume 2: The 1960s, New Wave, New Cinema, Re-evaluating Hollywood* (London: RKP/BFI, 1986); Nick Browne (ed.), *Cahiers du cinéma Volume 3: 1966–1972, the Politics of Representation* (London: RKP/BFI, 1990); David Wilson (ed.), *Cahiers du cinéma Volume 4: 1973–1978* (London: Routledge, forthcoming 1994).
- 8 Antoine de Baecque, *Cahiers du cinéma: Histoire d'une Revue, Tome 2*, p. 292. Translation my own; hereafter all translations my own unless otherwise indicated.
- 9 The syllogism *cinéma-roi* is drawn from Jacques Aumont's reading of Bazin, Mitry and Metz around the notion of *montage-roi*. See Jacques Aumont, *Montage Eisenstein*, trans. Lee Hildreth, Constance Penley, Andrew Ross (London: BFI, 1987), p. 30.
- 10 Raymond Bellour, Catherine David, Christine Van Assone, *Passages de l'Image* (Paris: Editions Centre Georges Pompidou, 1990).
- 11 The critical/theoretical angles of which are usefully covered in Serge Daney, *Le Salaire de Zappeur* (Paris: Ramsay, 1988) and *Devant la recrudescence des vols de sacs à main: cinéma, télévision, information* (Lyon: Aléas Editeur, 1991); Raymond Bellour, *L'Entre-Images: photo, cinéma, vidéo* (Paris: Editions La Différence, 1990).
- 12 The 'refusal of spectacle' had been an editorial policy from November 1972 (no. 24) and involved the banishing of pictures and photographs from the cover. This policy lasted until January 1976 (no. 262/3) when illustrations were reinstated.

importance. This is partly evidenced by the paucity of *Cahiers* material from the 1980s available in translation. The standard reference work is the three volume history edited consecutively by Jim Hillier and Nick Browne which covers the 1950s through to the early 1970s. An additional fourth volume will extend the translation and coverage of the journal up to 1978, stopping just short of the 1980s.⁷

After the new wave associations had waned, the theoretical work undertaken on post-1968 *Cahiers* around issues of cinema, ideology and subjectivity was also highly influential. This was a period during which the politico-theoretical Zeitgeist was informed by Althusser, Foucault and Lacan and when *Cahiers* participated in the 'second discovery of Soviet Cinema' and the formulation of a 'Brechtian' cinematic aesthetic. The feverish cinephilia of the new wave had given way to a politicized, activist critical orientation that, in Britain and the US, found increasing academic receptiveness. The polemics issuing from *Cahiers* in the 1970s may well have differed greatly in substance and intent from those of the 1950s and 1960s, but they were transmitted with vigour and attentively received. By contrast, issues debated in the 1980s have yet to find a similar resonance and receptiveness abroad.

Cinema has been the dominant medium. It is no longer. It had the monopoly of the mass imagination. It has no longer. Today it is dominated by television, of course, but also by the language of advertising.⁸

This statement from the February 1978 editorial signals a central critical tenet of *Cahiers* in the 1980s and from which many other critical positions follow; that television had effectively dethroned *cinéma-roi*,⁹ reducing its status to that of simply another station in 'the passage of the image', to use Raymond Bellour's phrase.¹⁰ It was with precisely this 'loss' – of sovereignty, of an *aura* in the modified Benjaminian sense – that *Cahiers* had to engage from the late 1970s onwards. Much of the most important *Cahiers* work in the 1980s, and in French media theory generally,¹¹ follows from the understanding that the increasingly *audiovisual* future of the cinema has repercussions for authorship, spectatorship, criticism and for the journal's perception of their respective modes and functions.

The February 1978 issue also marked a change in layout. The renewed incorporation of photographs, both on the cover and within, demonstrated that *Cahiers* had definitively relinquished the 'refusal of spectacle' that had been a feature of the early 1970s.¹² During this period the journal had appeared irregularly, putting

13 Michel Mesnil, 'Les Cahiers du cinéma: histoire et perspectives', *Esprit*, January 1992, p. 75.

out four to five issues a year between 1971 and 1973, and existing under the constant pressure of financial insolvency brought on by a fall in circulation from 15,000 copies in 1968 to an all-time nadir of 3,400 in February 1973. The authors of the February 1978 editorial – the then co-editors Serge Daney and Serge Toubiana – inherited a journal convalescing from the years of 'political shipwreck'.¹³

Toubiana's editorship, which lasted from August 1981 until December 1991, was the longest tenure of any *Cahiers* editor, and is usefully viewed against this background as a prolonged salvage operation, reformulating the journal's look and identity. Above all, it was opened up both to outside influences – an increased sensitivity to the mutations of the French audiovisual environment – and from within – to a renewed sense of the journal's own history.

Cahiers' re-engagement with its critical heritage expresses itself in a double movement of rupture and continuity. On the one hand, the political and theoretical tendencies are marginalized and a journalistic axis is developed in the *Journal des Cahiers du cinéma* insert created in January 1980. On the other hand, the 'return to cinema' is articulated in a manner that consciously invokes the *Cahiers jaunes*, notably in the reinstatement of the long occulted coverage of mainstream US cinema. The valorization of Hollywood directors was, after all, the critical terrain on which the auteur had been conceptualized in the 1950s. Toubiana's choice of *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1978) as cover-image in August 1979 was not only the first (post-)Hollywood film so represented in ten years, but also signalled that a central element of *Cahiers'* traditional critical focus was back on the agenda. The figuring of the 'blockbuster' subsequently became a touchstone in *Cahiers'* reformulation of the auteur as an oppositional presence in 1980s French cinema. The 'return to cinema' in the 1980s, then, is a return to a critical object different in nature to that of the 1960s and 1970s. While certain critical strategies traditional to *Cahiers* proved recuperable (the concentration on US cinema, the auteur) these too were reformulated in line with the journal itself.

The aesthetic, formal and institutional repercussions of audiovisual hybridization were set squarely on the *Cahiers* agenda, with a parallel understanding that film criticism had likewise been affected. Toubiana and Daney made this clear in their February 1973 editorial where, as with many other elements present in the same piece, it figured as a statement of intent towards the redefinition of *Cahiers'* identity and function:

¹⁴ de Baecque, *Cahiers du cinéma: Histoire d'une Revue, Tome 2*, p. 293.

¹⁵ *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 307 (1980) in *ibid.*, p. 293.

¹⁶ Antoine de Baecque, *Esprit*, January 1992, p. 75.

¹⁷ Serge Toubiana, *Esprit*, January 1992, p. 71.

¹⁸ Serge Daney in de Baecque, *Histoire d'une Revue, Tome 2*, p. 309.

Does the mutation of the cinema bring with it a corresponding crisis in what is written about cinema? Is there a crisis amongst the reviews? Without doubt, but not all of them know it Criticism, such as it continues to be practised, is increasingly difficult to distinguish from promotion.¹⁴

The *Cahiers* thesis declared that the massification of the media brought with it an expanded, accelerated cultural discourse around cinema but one lacking any compensating polemical or critical development, with the lamentable consequence of producing only ' . . . a generalised babble, neither truly critical nor truly promotional, a bit of everything at once, in perfect allegiance with fashions and institutions'.¹⁵

It remained *Cahiers*' task to orientate itself anew within this discourse, whilst also retaining something of the identity it had acquired – from the assault on the French *cinéma de qualité* in the 1950s through to the Maoist years – as a journal possessing a critical line, as 'une revue de combat'.¹⁶ The enduring tenability of this identity was by no means assured, as a rhetorical statement by Toubiana in an *Esprit* interview confirms: 'Is this rebel attitude still possible today, or are we completely integrated in the cultural discourse?'¹⁷ It is possible to read the developments of *Cahiers* throughout the 1980s as an extended response to this self-imposed challenge, but to do so involves widening the terms of reference to include other elements of the journalistic terrain towards which *Cahiers* increasingly gravitated.

Première and *Studio* magazines together embody the tendency of mainstream French film journalism to become an adjunct of industry self-advertisement which Daney and Toubiana lament. The appearance of such high-profile 'glossies' – *Première* in July 1976 and *Studio* in March 1987 – intersected with the beginnings of *Cahiers*' reformulation of its identity and its subsequent consolidation. If the journal's grand idea for the 1980s was to steadily reinsert itself, to use Daney's words, at 'the heart of cinema',¹⁸ then it was imperative that the 'certain tendency' of French cinema journalism these new arrivals represented be reckoned with.

This reckoning took a variety of forms – not the least of which was *Cahiers*' shedding of its former dour layout – and can be seen to have been governed by an active diversification of its functions both as journal and as critical 'institution'. *Le Journal des Cahiers du cinéma* represented a significant critical diversification and occupied a central position – both physically and symbolically – in the development of the journal across the 1980s. Between January 1981 and December 1988 *Le Journal* existed within *Cahiers* as a sixteen-page supplement with its own layout and a specific brief: to explore the journal's dominant

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 305.

critical idea of the 1980s, that 'cinema can only exist in as much as it is traversed by other viewpoints',¹⁹ that is, by a growing audiovisual network.

Le Journal is the materialization of this concern with '*le cinéma traversé*', as it explicitly concentrated on these 'crossings': television, video, photography and applied image manipulation. As its banner suggests, *Le Journal* was also conceived to fulfil a journalistic purpose, providing festival and location reports, detailing the changing production structures in the institution of French cinema, in short, to broaden the journal's scope. Amongst other effects – which included increasing *Cahiers*' circulation and consolidating its once hazardous financial viability – *Le Journal* gave *Cahiers* the profile of a review with 'two speeds'. The traditionally developed critical pace of the monthly accommodated a newfound journalistic component demanding breadth and topicality of coverage. Crucially, it enabled *Cahiers* to orient itself within the generalized 'babble' largely on its own terms. The type of personnel associated with *Le Journal* throughout the 1980s indicates *Cahiers*' increased interest in the technologies of media hybridization as well as with the details of practical working methods. Jean-Paul Fargier (*vidéaste* and video theoretician), Alain Bergala (critic and filmmaker), Caroline Charpentier (cinematographer), Jean-Pierre Beauviala (developer of the Aaton camera, collaborator with Godard, 'scientific adviser' to *Cahiers* and partner in *Editions de l'Etoile*), and Raymond Depardon (member of the Magnum photographic agency and filmmaker) are amongst the most notable in this respect. Combining critical diversification and journalistic intervention, *Le Journal* also picked up and reworked a traditional strategy of *Cahiers*, that of defining itself against other cinephile journals, especially *Positif*, its enduring *frère-ennemi*.

Founded in May 1952, *Positif* has been *Cahiers*' longstanding critical rival and a touchstone whenever the journal's need for critical self-definition was pressing. Whilst early rivalries can be seen as a natural critical competitiveness emerging from the cinephilic hotbed that was Paris in the late 1950s and early 1960s, there were also warring ideological elements behind the critical antipathies. The apoliticism of the early *Cahiers* was frequently lambasted by the traditionally more leftist (and Surrealist influenced) *Positif*, and is well documented elsewhere.²⁰ It is instructive to set side by side two critical assessments aimed at *Positif*. In December 1971 *Cahiers* formed what might be called a broad left alliance with the journal of radical literary theory *Tel Quel* and the radical film journal *Cinéthique*, issuing a tripartite manifesto against the '*gauchistes antithéoriques*' of *Positif*.²¹ twenty years later, on the occasion of *Positif*'s own fortieth anniversary, Antoine de Baecque characterized the magazine as having

²⁰ Hillier, *Cahiers du cinéma* Volume 1: the 1950s; Elsaesser, *Two Decades in Another Country*.

²¹ de Baecque, *Histoire d'une Revue*, Tome 2, p. 245.

²² Antoine de Baecque, 'Retours de cinéphile', *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 460 (1992), p. 35. See also Patrick McGilligan, 'POSITIF: The Little Magazine That Could', *Film Quarterly*, January/February 1993.

²³ Joel Magny, 'Le cinéma à la page', *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 454 (1992), p. 85.

consistently represented a 'cinophilic easy conscience', choosing to valorize *Cahiers*' own ruptures and discontinuities in contrast to its rival's 'easygoing positivist continuity'. Whilst I am clearly guilty here of extreme selectivity, these two discursive moments, when set together, accurately illustrate the extent to which *Cahiers* has come to value its partiality. In de Baecque's scenario, *Cahiers*' partiality extends to include theoretical, ideological and auteurist *partis-pris*, while *Positif*'s incorrigible auteurism has enabled the journal to hopscotch the traps, detours and *détournements* that *Cahiers* has undergone:

Positif today is surely the journal that most openly sanctifies the notion of the auteur, this trap where the names of young, older, very old and ancient directors are spread across pages that age ahead of cinema itself.²²

Whilst *Positif* never backed itself into a politico-theoretical impasse similar to that of *Cahiers*, neither has it taken advantage of the after-effects of 1968 which clearly opened a breach of influence on French criticism.²³ This breach was identified and has been effectively and consistently filled by *CinémAction*. Created in 1978 by Guy Hennebelle, former *soixante-huitard*, co-author of volumes on Palestinian and anti-imperialist cinemas and director of *7ème Art*, the cinema imprint of *Editions du Cerf*. Aimed principally towards a newer academic readership, *CinémAction* has picked up and developed ideologically-informed aspects of cinema criticism (for instance gender and race politics in representation) more systematically than *Cahiers* and *Positif* who have either neglected them or treated them only within the rubric of chosen auteurs. *CinémAction* puts out between four and six issues a year, each one thematically organized. Whilst it is true that *Positif* and *Cahiers* are themselves organized around thematic issues, *CinémAction* has been able to deal with a wider range of themes than the other two journals. For instance, issues have focused on feminist film theory, media studies, and television, but also 'other' national cinemas – Arab, South African, Latin American – and auteurs: Ousmane Sembène, Youssef Chahine. It has established its profile as one combining the in-depth coverage expected of a book-length study with the regular publication that a specifically targeted readership requires.

Thus *Positif* and *CinémAction* on one side, *Première* and *Studio* on the other, loosely define the critical community within and against which *Cahiers* defined itself in the 1980s. They were joined – leaping ahead somewhat to the late 1980s/early 1990s – by two new publications: *Trafic* (November 1991) and *Cinémathèque* (May 1992). While the first of these involved Serge Daney, the single inescapable critical presence of the 1980s whose work I shall consider further on, *Cinémathèque* links up with and

²⁴ Serge Toubiana, *Esprit*, January 1992, p. 82.

²⁵ de Baecque, *Histoire d'une Revue*, Tome 2, p. 305.

²⁶ Philippe Roger, 'Du casse à la passe', in Serge Daney, *Devant la recrudescence*, p. 199.

consolidates a tendency that has traditionally been more developed in *Positif* (as well as *Cahiers de la Cinémathèque*) than in *Cahiers*, the exegesis of cinema history. This 'turn to history', whether critical or institutional (and with the attendant risk of a 'necro-nostalgic' impulse to monumentalize *l'objet-cinéma*), has a particular resonance for *Cahiers*, which sees it erected alongside the audiovisual future of cinema, as the medium's other destiny. *Cahiers* reactivated its vocation as *une revue de combat* between these destinies and, aware that it could no longer seek refuge in theory or dogma, understood that both need to be engaged with, if not subscribed to. It is in the terms of this engagement that one can see *Cahiers* revisit and reformulate the auteur as a neo-polemic, as a critical space for 'a living idea of cinema'.²⁴

Serge Toubiana, as editor from August 1981 to October 1992, developed and consolidated *Cahiers* with an eye on its past as well as its place in the present. The active pursuit of diversification under his editorship, aside from those aspects mentioned above, also included the development of an important publishing element. After a series of publishing and distribution agreements first with Belfond in the late 1960s and then Gallimard in the late 1970s, *Cahiers* integrated its publishing activities within its own administration. A distribution deal with Le Seuil, signed in 1984 and still active, secured the *Cahiers* imprint *Editions de l'Etoile*. With a catalogue of over one hundred titles, by 1991 *Editions de l'Etoile* represented 20 per cent of the *Cahiers* portfolio with 2.7 million francs at its disposal. What was a diversification in the early 1980s is now a feature of *Cahiers*. The publishing imprint is conceived as a space for developing and extending the critical concerns of the journal. It is also an institution whose status has become that of a 'genuine press group on a reduced scale',²⁵ with the effect that the journal's latterday profile as the 'holy of holies' of an anachronistic cinéphilie has given way to that of a quasi-autonomous and financially healthy publishing enterprise that remains, nevertheless, devoted to its characteristic, deliberately partial critical opinions.

If Toubiana – who abdicated his editorship to manage *Editions de l'Etoile* – can be seen to have coordinated this gradual but decisive change in *Cahiers*' status, it is arguably Daney's work that will, in the future, go to define the critical preoccupations of the decade. Whilst there is not the space here to fully explore or substantiate what has become the common characterization of Daney, namely, 'that he is to the eighties what Bazin was to the fifties: that which will remain of the epoch when we will have forgotten it',²⁶ his paradoxical centrality to *Cahiers* in the 1980s

demands an outline. It is paradoxical because for much of the decade, Daney's critical work took place outside the journal he had come to think of as his *maison-mère*. Having written his first article for *Cahiers* in June 1964 (on the Frank Tashlin/Jerry Lewis film *Who's minding the store?* [1963]) Daney traversed the retreat from the *politique des auteurs*, the 'internationalist' phase, the years of theory and the Mao years. In December 1973, with the publication of a text entitled '*Fonction critique*', he signalled the beginning of the journal's 'return to cinema'. Co-editor with Serge Toubiana (who arrived at *Cahiers* in January 1973) between 1973 and 1979, editor-in-chief from June 1979, Daney left the journal in August 1981 to write for the daily *Libération*. He left the latter in 1991 to found his own journal *Trafic* which came out shortly before his death from AIDS in June of the same year. Daney put his mark on *Cahiers* in the 1980s as a kind of 'absent presence', just as *Cahiers* had an impact on Daney's work for *Libération* where he wrote a daily column on television, *Les Fantômes du permanent*. Daney's critical trajectory is important for two reasons. Firstly, as an acknowledgement that cinema's centre of gravity had irrevocably shifted, encapsulated in one of his central texts, '*Du grand au petit écran*':

There is nothing more unanimous (and more satisfied) than the following cry: films are not *shown* on television. Yes, of course television shows them, but they 'show' so badly But it is preferable to fall upon *L'Inhumaine* by accident, while zapping between two commercials and a video-clip, thereby discovering a beautiful film, rather than to feel obliged to call it beautiful (or, worse, 'interesting') after seeing it as part of a highly mediatised 'cultural' sermon.²⁷

²⁷ Serge Daney, *Le Salaire de Zappeur*, pp. 163/168-9.

His awareness that the televisual broadcasting of films was now the norm is the second crucial feature of Daney's work on *Libération*, where he was able not only to observe the transformation of cinema by television, but also to be in closer cultural and critical proximity to a generation whose own introduction to cinema history no longer existed solely through the *Cinémathèque Française*:

. . . it's been a greater pleasure for me to write on an old film, even a poor one, shown on television and seen by many than on a worthwhile novelty opening to an empty hall Because, for us as well, time has passed and it's tempting to write for that part of the *Libération* readership that is twenty years old, that one doesn't know, and to whom one would like to transmit the feeling that all this has already existed for others before them.²⁸

²⁸ Philippe Roger, 'Le Passeur' in Serge Daney, *Devant la recrudescence*, p. 6.

²⁹ Gilles Deleuze, 'Optimisme, pessimisme et voyage. Lettre à Serge Daney', in Serge Daney, *Ciné-journal: 1981–1986*, (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1988), p. 8.

³⁰ Serge Daney, 'Journal de l'an passé', *Trafic*, no. 1 (1992), p. 5.



Les Cahiers Jaunes, no. 32 (1954): cover-image of *Touchez pas au Grisbi* (Jacques Becker, 1954) for an interview with Becker by Truffaut and Rivière. Courtesy: Cahiers du cinéma/BFI Stills

At the risk of perhaps overemphasizing the cultural philanthropy of Daney's critical project, this gives a clear reason for his departure from *Cahiers*, even whilst he carried with him a pronounced and vital Bazinian inheritance. When Gilles Deleuze wrote of Daney: 'You have not renounced finding a profound link between cinema and thought . . . you have thus maintained the grand conception of cinema's first age . . . cinema as a new art and new thought',²⁹ it was in direct acknowledgement of this Bazinian inheritance, but a revived Bazinianism, one that was useful to the 1980s *cinéophile*-critic for a variety of reasons. Not the least of these is the pedigree and longevity of Bazin's influence over French criticism. More specifically, the concern with the ontology of the image instituted by Bazin proved particularly significant in the 1980s, a period of unprecedented mediatization. Bazin's discourse of 'origins' – basic, global (essentialist?) questions of cinema – was refigured by Daney in a completely different environment. It informed his work on *Libération* and included a deep pessimism towards television that developed and crystallized in the *Trafic* project. Daney states quite baldly in the first issue that this journal will concern itself with

. . . those sweet but sickening questions that it seemed we would never ask ourselves again. For example: is cinema an art? Will it be conserved, wholly or in part? And what will become of that which we loved in it?³⁰

With *Trafic* Daney effects his own 'return to cinema', but one that seems impossible without the crucial detour via television. The analogy with Bazin is worthwhile in that Daney's work – on *Cahiers*, *Libération* and *Trafic* alike – offers a sustained *cinéophile* engagement with the status of the image, one profoundly informed by its *Cahiers* inheritance. Across his career trajectory during the 1980s, Daney goes to personify the critical 'rebel attitude' that *Cahiers* could no longer represent itself.

I will conclude with a brief examination of *Cahiers*' re-engagement with the question of the auteur. To read 1980s French film culture through the prism of *Cahiers*' interventions is necessarily to offer only a partial reading. However, even in its partiality, the journal's reconsideration of the auteur engages with multiple elements of 1980s French film culture: the critical, the creative and the institutional. In his editorial of the thirtieth anniversary edition of May 1981, Daney signalled the recognition that the auteur now had plural connotations:

. . . up to the point of containing in a single word what 'metteur-en-scène', 'director' or even 'producer' used to hold

31 Serge Daney, *La Rampe: Cahier critique 1970–1982* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma/Gallimard, 1983), p. 157.

32 For further accounts of Lang's audiovisual policy see: Mark Hunter, *Les jours les plus Long* (Paris: Editions Odile Jacob, 1991) and 'Les Années Lang: Abécédaire du cinéma français', *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 381 (1986). See also Susan Hayward's account in this issue.

33 Olivier Assayas, 'Sur une politique', *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 353 (1983), p. 24.



The 'refusal of spectacle' in the 'maquette pure et dure' of *Cahiers* no. 244 (1973)
Courtesy: *Cahiers du cinéma*/BFI Stills

separate. All at once, one no longer knows very well what 'auteur' expresses'³¹

Daney identified two features of the 1980s auteur. Firstly that, quite simply, the word conceived to designate artistic singularity had gradually become so ubiquitous as to be standardized, impoverished, nearly meaningless. Secondly, Daney pointed to the producer as a film's potential auteur, thus prefiguring *Cahiers*' concentration on the institutional aspects of the auteur question. The reasons for this are worth exploring.

Just as one cannot discuss *Cahiers* in the 1980s without mentioning Daney, it is equally improper to consider the French cinema of this decade without mentioning Jack Lang, the Minister for Culture. It would not be fanciful to suggest that Lang's '*politique de prestige du cinéma français*', one of the two symbolic pillars of the original *Réforme du cinéma* of May 1982, rested on a virtual institutionalization of the auteur. What had been a radical self-promotional discourse in the 1950s was taken up by Lang in the 1980s and given an *arrière-garde* accent, becoming a policy of subsidy and preservation.³² The irony of this development did not escape *Cahiers*, as Olivier Assayas, writing in a special issue entitled 'Cinéma d'auteur: la cote d'alerte', noted: 'It's a paradoxical destiny that a theory intended to privilege filmmakers of the most marked individuality only gave birth, in the end, to a uniformity which is 'auteur cinema'',³³ but it is just such a uniformity that enabled Lang to create the image of an object worth preserving, and around which was developed a discourse appealing to cultural patrimony in equally weighted terms of nationhood and cultural identity – '*la politique de prestige du cinéma français*', after all.

Auteur cinema, recruited to symbolize a strand of French cinematic patrimony, was increasingly assisted by the State in a variety of ways ranging from straightforward subsidy to a more coercive interventionism. An example of this latter approach occurred after the Hyères Conference of November 1989 when, exploiting the generally popular anti-Americanism fundamental to the early formulation of his cultural policy, Lang forced the three major distribution companies (UGC, Gaumont-Pathé, ParaFrance) to increase their programming of what he delicately termed '*oeuvres fragiles*'. That the idea of the auteur had a distinct institutional aspect to it, implying a certain relation to the institution of French cinema, is evident in the pre-new wave *Cahiers* attacks on '*le cinéma de papa*' in the 1950s and early 1960s. The thoroughgoing transformation of the institution that Lang oversaw throughout the 1980s, with the absorption of the auteur that this entailed, demanded that *Cahiers*, the journal that had incubated the idea, promoted and produced auteur

³⁴ de Baecque, *Histoire d'une Revue*, Tome 2, p. 308.



Martin Sheen in *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1978) signalled a return to coverage of US commercial cinema in *Cahiers* no. 302 (1979).

Courtesy: *Cahiers du cinéma*/BFI Stills

³⁵ Colin MacCabe, *On the Eloquence of the Vulgar: a Justification of the Study of Film and Television* (London: BFI, 1993), pp. 14–15.

³⁶ Aside from those *Cahiers* critics who have become directors (Bergala, Dubroux, Assayas and, nominally, Carax amongst them) *Cahiers* personnel such as Daney, Bergala and Aumont are, or have been, involved in teaching academic film studies at Parisian institutions. Bonitzer teaches screenwriting at FEMIS, the French national film school.

³⁷ Jill Forbes, *The Cinema in France after the New Wave*, pp. 15–16.

directors, be more than simply an interested observer.

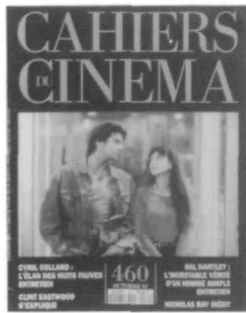
To this end the journal valorized specific examples of production structures that could be seen to allow the ‘minority vocation’³⁴ of auteur cinema to exist within and against the standard production system. Revealingly, the directors presented as exemplary purveyors of production ‘microsystems’ (a *Cahiers* neologism much favoured in the late 1970s and early 1980s) are themselves of the new wave ‘generation’ of French auteurs: Truffaut and Les Films du Carosse; Godard and SonImage; Rohmer and Les Films du Losange. Simply to suggest that these directors somehow represent *Cahiers* is not enough: rather, *Cahiers* had returned unequivocally to the idea that it was the journal’s historically determined function to represent the singularity of these directors and to agitate for the continuing possibility of a certain model of French auteur cinema.

In his lecture inaugurating the British Film Institute’s MA in Film and Television Studies, Colin MacCabe focused on the significance of *Cahiers*’ and the Bazinian legacy to the study of film and television. He suggested:

The magazine’s original strength had been to read film from the point of view of the audience However, there was always an ambiguity in which the *Cahiers* viewer became the privileged fan who distinguished himself from the rest of the audience in his ability to recognise not just art but the guarantee of art – the artist. It was this privileged position which the positions of ’68 tried to break from. But deprived of any institutional engagement with education or distribution, *Cahiers* could only reproduce in various etiolated forms the earlier aesthetic and political discourses.³⁵

There is scope for disagreement with MacCabe over his assertion that *Cahiers* – post-new wave, post-1968 – did, in fact, become as deprived of institutional engagements with education and distribution as he maintains: equally to suggest that the ‘earlier aesthetic discourse’ of the auteur has since only been reproduced in etiolated forms is to overlook the complexity of the critical reformulations that took place in *Cahiers* during the 1980s.³⁶ As Jill Forbes has noted, ‘in film criticism the “auteur” has always been a fiction, a polemical device used to promote a certain kind of reading, rather than a particular kind of writing’ and, as such, is a means by which critics and filmmakers alike orient themselves ‘in relation to the industry, to the “nouvelle vague”, to gender, and to the audience’.³⁷

It is this aspect that I wish to bring to the forefront, focusing on the ways in which the auteur has been pressed into service



Cyril Collard and Romane Bohringer in *Les Nuits fauves* (1992) which, for Thierry Jousse in *Cahiers*, no. 460 (1992), 'came to shatter the contemporary lethargy of French cinema'.
Courtesy: *Cahiers du cinéma*/BFI Stills

38 Pascal Bonitzer, *Peinture et Cinéma: Décadrages* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma/Éditions de l'Étoile, 1985); Jacques Aumont, *L'Oeil interminable: Cinéma et Peinture* (Paris: Librairie Segquier, 1989); Hubert Damisch, *L'Origine de la Perspective* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989); Raymond Bellour (ed.), *Cinéma et Peinture: Approches* (Paris: PUF, 1991).

39 Thomas Elsaesser, 'Rivette and the end of cinema', *Sight and Sound*, April 1992, p. 21.

during the 1980s as a response to the numerous 'legitimation crises' of 1980s French film culture, themselves with resonances in the coextensive spheres of general cultural politics, film production, spectatorship and theory.

I wish to investigate here how *Cahiers* oriented itself theoretically, with recourse to a reformulated idea of the auteur, in response to development within these other spheres.

The axis on which this reformulation predominantly took place was a renewed theoretical engagement with the relationship between cinema and painting. This was by no means new territory for *Cahiers* which, during the 1970s and most notably in the work of Jean-Louis Baudry, had confronted the ideological 'neutrality' of the cinematic apparatus with the optical laws and the psychosocial structuring of perception seen at work in Quattrocento perspective. Following on from this earlier work, whilst laying less emphasis on the Althusserian/Lacanian intellectual paradigm of the period than Baudry, Pascal Bonitzer began to publish a series of articles in January 1979, collected in 1985 in one volume entitled *Décadrages*. Bonitzer's work was supplemented throughout the 1980s and early 1990s with essays and collections by Alain Bergala, Jacques Aumont, Raymond Beilour and Hubert Damisch.³⁸ It would be misleading to suggest that all this work had as its sole agenda a revivification of the idea of the auteur; however, much of it (especially the work of Aumont, Bergala and Bonitzer) effected a theoretical *rapprochement* between the two media through an implicit, occasionally explicit, appeal to the auteur. Nor was this tendency restricted to theoretical work alone: certain exemplary auteur films of the 1980s focus precisely on this relationship. A nominal 'canon' of films crystallizing the issues contained in the painting/cinema coupling would contain, amongst others, Raoul Ruiz's *L'Hypothèse du tableau volé* (1978), Godard's *Passion* (1982), Straub/Huillet's *Cézanne* (1989), Pialat's *Van Gogh* (1991) and Rivette's *La Belle Noiseuse* (1991). The fact that the latter two films were both awarded major prizes at the 1991 Cannes Festival is significant if only as a symbolic expression of the extent to which a certain sort of French auteur cinema can be seen to construct itself across the 1980s, through a liaison with painting. As Thomas Elsaesser has commented, Rivette's film 'counts as a move in what seems to be a "Kulturkampf" raging in France over the meaning and definition of French cinema. In this cultural battle "painting and cinema" has become a kind of code, though it is, at least for an outsider, far from clear exactly where the lines are drawn'.³⁹

What Elsaesser seems to be suggesting is that the painting/cinema has a specific *strategic* function, namely the valorization of a particular model of French auteur cinema whose

⁴⁰ Lynne Kirby, 'Painting and Cinema: the frames of discourse', *Camera Obscura*, no. 8 (September 1988).

⁴¹ Aumont, *L'Œil interminable*, p. 249.

very specificity to French debates restricts its value as general theory. 'Painting/cinema', then, can be seen as a *politique* first and foremost: a function which overrides its potential as work-in-progress towards the creation of a 'new' field of study which might have implications for the study of the relationship between the novel and film, and between theatre and cinema.⁴⁰

But *where*, and in response to *what*, are the lines drawn by the painting/cinema pair in relation to the auteur? Judging from the *Cahiers* formulations that emerged during the 1980s, the auteur is invoked in two particular forms, as an index of singularity in the face of industry standardization, and as 'the last artist' of 'the last artistic practice still held in the last artistic space, that of Romanticism'.⁴¹

As far as the first of these formulations is concerned, *Cahiers* deployed its notion of auteur cinema against two specific tendencies in French cinematic production in the 1980s. The strand of cinema heavily influenced by advertising aesthetics that came to be called *cinéma du look* was one. The second was the highly popular, internationally successful group of 'cultural superproductions' often falling in 'the heritage genre', typified by Claude Berri's adaptations of Marcel Pagnol's works, and films such as *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Jean-Claude Rappeneau, 1991). The British reception of the *cinéma du look* was revealing in its willingness to create a 'movement', a 'new new wave' out of the work of three directors – Jean-Jacques Beineix, Luc Besson and Léos Carax – where no such movement existed.

Interestingly, this critical dynamic occulted the status *Cahiers* accorded to Carax, as no less than the most gifted director of his generation. Carax is a prime example of 1960s *Cahiers*' 'jeune cinéma d'auteurs'. It is perhaps indicative of the journal's reduced international influence that *Cahiers*' promotion of Carax was barely acknowledged prior to the *folie des grandeurs* that was *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf* (1992), by which time the critical currency of *le cinéma du look* had waned. Carax's eligibility as a *Cahiers*-auteur may be seen to lie in the combination of a highly developed propensity for cinematic tributes – for example, to early Godard in *Mauvais sang*, and Jean Vigo in *Les Amants* – the vying registers of romantic pessimism and a euphoric mise-en-scene, and the elaboration over a trio of films of a proto-personal package of themes, characters and actors: all of which contributed to the necessary *singularity* of style seen as a traditional imperative of the auteur-director, and were key features separating Carax from other *Look* directors. This valorization of Carax intersects with the *Cahiers* engagement with painting or, more precisely, with the journal's mid-1980s recruitment of the idea of 'mannerism' as a possible film-critical hermeneutic. In his essay *D'une certaine manière*, Alain Bergala

⁴² Alain Bergala, 'D'une certaine manière', *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 370 (1985), p. 12.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴⁴ Alain Bergala, 'De la singularité au cinéma', *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 353 (1983), p. 16.

⁴⁵ Aumont, *L'Oeil interminable*, p. 249.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 249–50.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

cites art critic Philippe Maurières' definition of mannerism in the history of western painting as 'situating itself, from the start, at the brink, at the point of a "maturity" that, having fulfilled its promise, is burning up its reserves'.⁴²

For Bergala the *cinéma du look* is symptomatic of this sense of being 'too late', of coming irrevocably 'after', at a point where 'cinema no longer has Masters nor History, but presents itself as a reservoir of confused forms, motifs and inert myths which can be drawn upon in all 'cultural' innocence'.⁴³ What he elsewhere calls '*cinéphilie sans mémoire*' is the product of televisual broadcasting of films where the sense of a film's history of its '*singularity*' is erased.⁴⁴ Carax, perceived as displaying a traditional cinephilia, is thus cast as a direct descendent of the new wave. We can see, therefore, how in one respect *Cahiers'* deployment of the painting/cinema pair serves the attempt to reinstate a very conventional auteurist line. This might partly be attributed to the *Cahiers* willingness to fall back on its former critical dynamics: for instance, in characterizing films such as those of Berri as signalling French cinema's return to the *cinéma de qualité* of the 1940s and 1950s. It is as if this dynamic has a logic of its own, as if the return of the 'bad object' (the '*cinéma de qualité*') impels a somewhat torturous diversion via art history in order to resurrect the 'good object', the auteurist ideal, with which to counter it.

This issue goes deeper still, particularly in the work of Jacques Aumont, whose book *L'Oeil interminable: Cinéma et Peinture* most directly attests to what is at stake in the occasionally subterranean sense of *Cahiers'* engagement with the cinema/painting dialectic: 'Cinema, as we have known it, is the last of all the arts to date, the last art invented, and finally the last art *tout court*'.⁴⁵

It is precisely in this 'last artistic space, that of Romanticism' that Aumont positions cinema. The work that emerges from the newer technology of video is excluded from Aumont's cinematic schema: 'Video is not 'video-art' . . . except in a completely different space, meta-artistic, close to that of painting since Dada'.⁴⁶

Aumont goes all the way in claiming cinema for an unapologetically romantic vision of art and, in this space, argues for the legitimacy of the filmmaker to work like a painter: 'The best models have been, and remain, painting, the paradigmatic solitary art, and the painter, the major creative figure'.⁴⁷

For him, the 'auteur' is both a banality, indistinguishable from the 'image-producer' and a polemical fiction, invested with the hope of a generation of critics and filmmakers, that the cinema could have an artistic function coexistent with its industrial, commercial, no longer autonomous status. He concludes:

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 253.

⁴⁹ Hillier, *Cahiers du cinéma* Volume 1: the 1950s, p. 12. also John Hess, 'La politique des auteurs', *Jump Cut*, nos. 1 and 2.

⁵⁰ This proposition is advanced and explored by Ginette Vincendeau in 'France 1945–1965 and Hollywood: the *policier* as inter-national text', *Screen*, vol. 33, no. 1 (1992).

⁵¹ Richard Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism 1907–1939. Volume One: 1907–1929* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 340–1.

That it is necessary . . . to run back to the old idea of the 'artist' is curious, as much as is the 'return' to painting, but not without an explanation: nostalgia for the 'good old days' does not explain everything, and perhaps the demand for the title of artist is, basically, a subtle way, understood here economically, of adapting to the 'bad new days'. It is, in any case, to be understood as a response to cinema's institutional 'crisis', at least by the most lucid part of the 'profession'.⁴⁸

The interest of Aumont's position, representative of so much that motivates the cinema/painting debate in 1980s France, is precisely its unabashed traditionalism, its critical-pragmatic stance that returns as a response, at different times, to different 'crises'. As Jim Hillier, John Caughie and John Hess have each demonstrated about the original *politique des auteurs*:

because auteurism was essentially 'romantic' in conception, and because the dominant critical mode in the arts was already romantic, once the scandal died down auteurism was relatively easily accommodated in its simplest form, while its deeper implications had very little real impact.⁴⁹

It is relatively easy, with hindsight, to accuse Hillier of not taking into account that element of auteurism that MacCabe identifies (as does Bergala), namely, the centrality of the spectator equipped to 'recognise not just art, but the guarantee of art – the artist', in other words the cinephile-spectator to whom the new wave explicitly addressed their films. If we are now able to situate the new wave on the cusp of that historical moment where cinema *begins* to relinquish its hegemony as mass-spectacle, creating a 'minority' cinema in the breach,⁵⁰ then the return in the 1980s of an unapologetically Romantic register of auteurism/cinephilia must be seen as a symptomatic reaction to cinema's decisive integration into a wider moving-image culture: a deepening of the 'crisis' to which new wave 'auteurism' was an early response.

That auteur cinema and criticism should turn to painting is not in itself novel. As Richard Abel has identified, critics and filmmakers of the 1920s – Faure, Léger, Canudo, Vuillermoz and Dulac amongst them – recruited diverse stylistic tendencies in French painting, from impressionism, naturalism, symbolism and surrealism, to argue for cinema as a specifically *plastic* art, with painting established as a system of creative values to which avant-garde practices should aspire. French film criticism and theory of the 1920s, Abel argues, 'seemed perhaps most vital at the moment when it was posed on the brink of another crisis, the coming of sound'.⁵¹

It would appear, then, that the dual crises of legitimization and

⁵² George Steiner, *Real Presences: is there anything in what we say?* (London: Faber, 1991).

authority – the ‘legitimacy’ of cinema-as-art, the ‘authority’ of the director-as-artist – expressed in *Cahiers’* engagement with cinema/painting in the 1980s, is analogous to similar critical discourses of the 1950s and 1920s. The main difference now is that the tone of such criticism wavers between defiance and desperation: interestingly, the same register one finds in a work such as George Steiner’s *Real Presences*,⁵² an ur-text of mourning for the lost certainties of artistic ‘value’.

The pursuit and promotion of auteur cinema have continued in *Cahiers*. The necessity of continually repersonifying the auteur, alongside referential figures such as Godard, Straub and Rohmer, remains *Cahiers’* dominant critical strategy in relation to French cinema. In some respects, this allows *Cahiers* to combine its fully reinstated coverage of mainstream American cinema with a continued polemicization for a particular vision of French cinema, still out of favour outside France. The comparative receptions accorded to Cyril Collard’s *Les Nuits fauves/Savage Nights* (1992) in France and in Britain crystallizes the issue of *Cahiers’* noticeable absence of influence over British critical discourses.

Cahiers championed *Les Nuits fauves* as a film whose singularity was seen to reside in its ‘personal style’ above its technical competence, in its aesthetic ‘otherness’ rather than its representation of sexual and racial identities. The film is the story of Jean (played by Collard, whose signature on the film also extends to direction, script and parts of the musical soundtrack), a bisexual Parisian film editor diagnosed as HIV positive, and the effects of his disease on his relationships with his boyfriend Sami (Carlos Lopez) and his young girlfriend Laura (Romane Bohringer). With Collard’s death from AIDS in March 1993 barely six months after the film’s release, *Les Nuits fauves* became a *cause célèbre* in France, winning a total of six awards at the 1993 *Césars* ceremony.

In so lavishly garlanding *Les Nuits fauves*, the French cinema establishment seemed to short-circuit (through appropriation) the claims on which *Cahiers* had based its valorization of the film, namely as a work representing a tendency in young French filmmakers to privilege ‘la caméra-je’.⁵³ For *Cahiers*, *Les Nuits fauves* ‘[came] to shatter the comfortable lethargy of French cinema’ and, elsewhere in the same issue, ‘[it] is, without doubt, the most disturbing French film in a long time’.⁵⁴ Interestingly, little of this discourse of ‘aesthetic otherness’, crucial to *Cahiers’* promotion of Collard’s work, crossed the critical breach marked by the English channel. The focus on, and reception of, the film in Britain turned almost entirely on the ideological connotations of its representation of homosexuality and HIV; the *Cahiers* angle was lost in transit.⁵⁵

The current low status of *Cahiers* among the British critical

⁵³ Tristan de la Jarte, ‘Hautes solitudes’, *Cahiers du cinéma*, Hors série (1992), pp. 94–8.

⁵⁴ Thierry Jousse, ‘Donnez-nous du possible’, *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 460 (1992) p. 20; Serge Toubiana, ‘Carpe diem and night’, *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 460 (1992), p. 22.

⁵⁵ See Simon Watney, ‘The French Connection’, *Sight and Sound*, June 1993, pp. 24–5; Luke Candy, ‘First person singular, present tense’, *The Independent*, 11 November 1992.

⁵⁶ This will include a selection of Daney's work from *Ciné-journal* (including the introduction by Gilles Deleuze) and *Devant la recrudescence*, trans. Liz Heron and published as *Cinema in Transit*. Also forthcoming are Paul Virilio, *La Machine de Vision*, trans. Julia Rose; Jacques Aumont, *L'Image*, trans. Claire Pajackowska. All titles to be published by BFI, Spring 1994.

community, as crystallized around the example of *Les Nuits fauves*, indicates that if *Cahiers'* evacuation of ideology is out of step with Anglo-American critical discourses, there is still a great deal of catching up to do with the journal's contribution to aesthetic theory. Sadly, it has taken two deaths – those of Daney and Collard – to galvanize a move towards filling this gap. And, if Collard's status as 'star-martyr/auteur' eased his film's passage onto the international circuit, there remain other examples of 'jeune cinéma d'auteur' that languish in its wake, just as there remains well over a decade's worth of Daney's criticism awaiting translation and dissemination.⁵⁶

State, culture and the cinema: Jack Lang's strategies for the French film industry 1981–93

SUSAN HAYWARD

Ever since World War II, France's cinema, more than that of any other western country, has been at the receiving end of state aid and legislation intended to facilitate its growth. During the Occupation and under the Vichy regime, legislation was introduced to advance the position of cinema as a state-protected (though not state-owned) institution and to rationalize the film industry under one centralized body. That a repressive government should put in place a framework which, in many respects, enhanced the industry is not without its irony. However, the fact remains that in 1940 the *Comité d'organisation de l'industrie cinématographique* (COIC) was created as a consolidated organism covering the industry's disparate systems and that as an institution it has left a legacy that is still with the industry today in the form of the *Centre national de la cinématographie* (CNC, established in 1946).

The CNC is charged with maintaining control over the financing of films, the receipts from box-office takings and statistics pertaining to the totality of the film industry's practices. It is responsible for the management of the *Compte de soutien* which is a support fund for production and exhibition. Money comes into this fund from taxes, banks and the state and goes out in two forms: the *soutien automatique* which all French films and co-productions benefit from and the *avance sur recettes* which was originally implemented to finance films of 'quality' (that is,

mostly auteur films) but which is now far less selective.

Despite these already generous (especially to British eyes) attempts to aid the industry, it has to be said that at no time in France's cinema history has the intentionality of the state as protector been more in evidence than during the Socialists' two terms in power (1981–86; 1988–93). The successive Socialist governments have been more proactive than any of their predecessors both in terms of strategy and financing, and Jack Lang, as Minister of Culture, has had a higher profile than any previous holder of the title, including the first, André Malraux. So there is little surprise that Lang, at the end of his first mandate in March 1986 (when the Socialists lost the general election), proudly summed up the nature of his policies for the French film industry and their implementation in the following terms: 'The policies which have been followed over the last five years in close collaboration with film professionals have been the most ambitious ever undertaken both on the level of investment and output'.

However, given that Lang's two key concepts during his mandates have been '*l'état culturel*' for the state of the nation's culture in general and '*l'industrie culturelle*' for the film industry in particular, it could be argued (as many of his critics have done, including Jacques Toubon, the new Minister of Culture who came into office in April 1993) that over these two mandates there has been far too much state intervention, or at least too much emphasis on the role of the state, to the point where culture has run very close to being nationalized. And it is not difficult to see why some of the criticisms levelled at Lang included labelling his ministry the 'state producer', if we consider that during his first mandate the state, through his policies, had become the film industry's single most important co-producer.¹ Culture had not been so much an affair of the state since Malraux was appointed in 1959 by General de Gaulle.

Jack Lang is the only minister to have retained his portfolio throughout the successive Socialist governments. His title changed from Minister of Culture (1981–86) to Minister of Culture and Communication (1988–93), with Education added to his brief in 1990.² It was at his own insistence that his remit be stretched to include Communication, since he firmly believed that it was the deregulation of television and the subsequent increase in the number of television channels (during 1984–86) that served to thwart his endeavours to boost the film industry.³ Lang believed that to have control of television's Abel to cinema's Cain would facilitate his task during his second mandate because he could plan in terms of a global policy for France's 'audiovisual landscape'. Lang's unprecedented stay in power and the elevated status of his post (in terms of protocol, he was second only to

1 This label seems even more justified when the Ministry is seen investing directly in prestigious foreign auteurs' films through its *système d'aide directe au cinéma* – a direct aid system put in place by Lang in 1981 to assist international filmmakers wanting to coproduce with France.

2 There is something also curiously retrograde in this new title. The last time the cinema was under the tutelage of the Minister of Education was back in the Third Republic when, apart from one or two reports on the status of cinema, next to nothing was done to aid the then (as always, it would appear to the gloomier critics) ailing industry.

3 The present government has reversed this feature. Toubon's official title is Minister of Culture and Francophonie (matters concerning the French language) and, once more, Culture has been separated from Communication.

4 Lang's strong – even nationalistic – commitment is illustrated by the fact that, although he speaks fluent English, when interviewed in a recent BBC TV *Late Show* he spoke in French. France's culture is an affair of State and central amongst France's political/cultural artefacts is the cinema.

5 To cite an example of the significance of these increases: in 1982 Lang's adjustment to budget appropriations for cinema's 'ordinary' expenditures went up from FF18.9m to FF62.6m (an increase of 331%).

6 The situation with US distribution companies in France is quite complex and their strength in the distribution stakes is in part a result of EC regulations; these decree that where multinationals are concerned, the subsidiary companies that they have established in an EC country are considered to be of that country. So US production companies in France, such as United Artists and Paramount, can distribute their films made in France without having to pay consideration to quota systems.

the Prime Minister) attest to President Mitterrand's faith in the dynamism of his Minister and also to his belief in Lang's commitment to a competent strategy for, amongst other cultural artefacts, France's cinema.⁴

Strategies mark one: 1981–86

There can be no doubt that Lang had 'a certain idea' of French cinema; that he believed fervently that it was the state's responsibility to facilitate the filmmakers' task. Governments prior to his had relied on taxation at the exhibition end (chiefly on box-office receipts) to fund production. Lang had other ideas. To accomplish his ambitions for the cinema, his primary target was to reconcile art with money. To achieve this goal he capitalized on his status within the government as well as on his formidable energy and charisma. And clearly these factors (alongside his advocacy skills as a lawyer) greatly assisted him to obtain a huge tenfold increase in his budget, bringing it up to one per cent of the government's total budget.⁵ Whilst his ardour for culture in general and cinema in particular may astound outsiders, a sign of his appeal in his own country is that during his first mandate he was consistently chosen in the polls as France's most popular Minister.

As soon as Lang was appointed Minister of Culture, he commissioned Jean-Denis Bredin to draw up a comprehensive report on the future of French cinema. If Lang chose to prioritize cinema, it was because of all the cultural agencies this was the one that was, in French terms, at its weakest. Audiences were dropping and American products swamping the market (for comparative figures see chart on page 385). The Bredin report was swiftly drawn up and submitted on 3 November 1981. This report was remarkable for the unified vision of its guiding proposals for the economic and structural needs of the industry's culture in its broadest sense. Thus financial and structural support was advocated not just for the filmmakers, but also for film archives, libraries, research, education and professional training. So too regional cinema was to get serious attention, from the point of view of exhibition, distribution and filmmaking.

The Bredin report served as a basis for Lang's policy statement for the cinema which came out a year later. A first bold measure was to set in place an anti-trust policy to break up the virtual distribution monopoly of Gaumont-Pathé in order to create greater possibilities for independent distributors and exhibitors.⁶ To further assist the independents a special aid fund was established to help with distribution (aid is given on the basis of the films chosen with priority to French films) and exhibition (to

help refurbish the theatres) particularly in poorly served areas (such as city suburbs). Along similar decentralizing lines, an agency for regional cinemas (*Agence pour le développement régional du cinéma*, ADRC) was set up with a remit to provide better theatre venues by upgrading existing ones, reopening closed ones and building new ones (the state provided up to 20 per cent of the costs). By 1986 out of some 600 projected theatres, 200 were up and functioning. Lang was determined to increase audience numbers and his policies for independent distributors and regional cinemas were a first move in that direction.

A further move targeted distribution to regional cinemas. ADRC invested in, or 'funded' the distribution of, films by providing prints of movies already showing in Paris theatres and which major distributors might otherwise hold back from regional distribution. The interesting but controversial part of this project was that ADRC did not just 'fund' esoteric/art films but also popular ones. For instance, along with Wadja's *Danton* (1982), the other film chosen to launch this scheme was a Belmondo vehicle, *L'As des as* (1982). This was followed later by another Belmondo film *Le Marginal* (1983). These choices were bound to attract a large audience and so they served a double function: good publicity for the work of ADRC (and thus, indirectly, Lang's policies) and a pointer to the fact that distributors should rethink their policies. Although this policy helped to increase the number of spectators in regional cinemas, the numbers in Paris went down by the equivalent amount so that overall attendance figures remained more or less the same – around 180 million spectators a year. It should be added that ADRC, with its forty million franc annual budget, brought back only four million spectators over an eighteen-month period so initially the project was quite a costly affair.

The other essential ingredient of Lang's decentralizing policy was to develop regional professional training centres. By 1984, seven regional studios were in existence and the former *Maisons de la culture* (set up by Malraux in the 1960s to bring 'art' – usually Parisian-based artefacts – to the provinces) were renamed *Centres culturels* or *Centres de recherche et d'action culturelle*. These were designed to be more truly regional centres of innovation, cultural exchange and self-expression, as opposed to the mission stations of Parisian culture that they had been until Lang stepped in and changed their remit.

Lang's first series of reforms also addressed film production. With regard to finance, Lang established, in 1983, an institute for the financing of cinema – the *Institut pour le financement du cinéma et des industries des programmes* (IFCIC) – to act as a facilitator to credit by guaranteeing loans to both cinema and

7 Braunberger first came to prominence as a producer of several of Renoir's 1930s films and later played a vital role in the inception of the new wave. Beauregard also played an essential role in producing new wave films.

8 One reason was the unprecedented success in 1980 in the US of two French films (*Tess* and *La Cage aux folles*) produced by US companies (Columbia and United Artists respectively) but made in France. This emboldened US companies to import 'more of the same'. Gaumont set up a company with Columbia (Triumph). For a brief while, five US majors set up what they called a Classics section which, amongst other films, exhibited French imports, but by 1985 most of the Classics section had closed down.

television productions. He ensured better use of the *Compte de soutien*, resourced by a levy on ticket sales, including an increase in its funding to the *avance sur recettes*. Finally, the Commission of the *avance sur recettes* was now divided into two bodies, one deciding on aid to first or second films, the other on advances to already established filmmakers.

Lang also voiced considerable concern that the indigenous industry was garnering only 50 per cent of the home market. The need was to attract French audiences to French films, away from American products. Lang's diagnosis was that French film suffered from a poverty of script content and from a lack of good producers in the artistic sense of the word (the Braunbergers of the 1930s and 1960s and the Beauregards of the 1950–60s were the types he had in mind).⁷ This double lack meant that films were ill-prepared, partly as a result of the fact that funding (including the *avance sur recettes*) went into shooting the film and not into preproduction. Lang set himself the task of finding extra funding for preproduction, and by the beginning of 1985 had secured private and public funding for this project.

Lang's reforms in this area meant that businesses could invest in pre-production under the rubric of sponsorship (and get tax relief). Special agencies called SOFICAs (*Sociétés pour le financement de l'industrie cinématographique et audiovisuelle*) were set up to administer private investment in cinema. They had to be endorsed by the Minister of Finance and their investment could not exceed 50 per cent of production costs. In terms of tax-shelters, private investors could invest up to 25 per cent of their taxable revenue in cinema and audiovisual productions for a minimum period of five years and receive tax benefit in the meanwhile. Corporate tax breaks worked out at 50 per cent of the amount invested. This bold strategy facilitated more money into the industry than ever before. However, in some regards this has been counter-productive. The cost of film production tripled between 1981 and 1991, undoubtedly a side-effect of SOFICAs tendency to invest in 'prestigious' big-budget films. To quote just one example: of the ninety-four films made in 1988 only fourteen cost under five million francs (a low-budget film in the French context). Additionally, the films produced were not always successful at the box office, and here too the strategy has not been as effective as hoped. In 1981 the domestic share of the market was 50 per cent; by 1991 it was only 30 per cent. Conversely the American share of the market rose from 35 per cent in 1981 to 59 per cent by 1991.

Before 1985, French cinema had experienced an upswing in its fortunes. Audience figures remained stable, even increasing in some years and exports to the USA were faring relatively well.⁸ There were several contributory reasons to this success story.



Diva (Jean-Jacques Beineix, 1981): one of a new genre of French films during Jack Lang's first period
Courtesy: BFI Stills

9 This, at first very positive, outcome now has a sting in its tail. The Eclair studios (which were among the very first, dating back to the beginning of the century) are about to be sold off and it is likely that a US company will be purchasing them.

First, the introduction, or increased use, of new image and sound technology such as 70mm film, 'Scope and Dolby sound. Here new technology served as a means to an end – visual and aural pleasure attracted audiences, especially youth audiences who had been brought up on audiovisual stimuli. This brought studios back into greater use and, by the mid-1980s, thirty sets were available compared with nineteen in the 1970s. A second contributory reason was the emergence of a new 'genre' of French films. Notable for their faster pace and reduced dialogue, these films were arguably more international and closer to American movies as well as advertising and music videos. On these counts, films such as *Diva* (1981) and *Subway* (1985) were hits because of their appeal, through their apparent modernity, to the dominant cinema-going audience – the fifteen to twenty-four year olds. A third cause was a bursting onto the screen of a whole new school of young actors such as Christophe Lambert, Lambert Wilson, Sandrine Bonnaire, Beatrice Dalle, Juliette Binoche and Sophie Marceau. The success of these films abroad, particularly in the USA, brought another plus in its wake. They served to export an image of French production practices which appealed to Hollywood. Thus investment in studios, aided by Lang's policies, brought the Americans over to shoot titles in France.⁹

Thus, overall, Lang's policies during this first half of the 1980s did function to nurture the industry, stem the US tide and improve on exports. But this reinvigoration was brief.

Many reasons can be mooted for the decline in France's success story both on the international and national fronts. With regard to the decline in exports to the USA post-1985, the most obvious reason is that in the early 1980s, the USA was facing the demands of the newly established Cable TV and Home Box Office to fill their programmes. In part then, France's success was based on meeting this need. The initial success on the national front was generated by the feeling that a new kind of cinema was being made – as indeed it was. However, the *cinéma du look*, as it became known, did not sustain audience interest for long. A further contributory cause was Lang's ambition to compete on a level footing with the USA by fostering European co-productions (sometimes dismissed as 'Euro-puddings'). Large investments in this area have not, however, yielded the results that had been hoped for.

Another reason for the decline in the French film industry's fortunes post-1985 comes as a direct result of inflationist policies in distribution. By distributing a large number of prints to film theatres in Paris and provincial cities (with funds from ADRC, as already mentioned) a film soon grosses its potential revenue and thus shortens its lifetime on the big screen. It is then hived off to video and television. The consequences of this are clear. If

10 Billion in the US sense of the term: that is, one thousand million.

French cinema in context: comparative figures for 1981–1991

Audience size:

	USA	UK	France
1980	1bn ¹⁰	54m	181m
1991	981m	103m	115m

Number of films produced:

	USA	UK	France
1981	—	46	214
1991	455	54	156

Average cost of films (in \$):

	USA	UK	France
1981	—	—	1m
1991	26	5m	4m

US film products in Europe:

	UK	France
1981	65%	41%
1991	65%	47%

US share of the film market in Europe:

	UK	France
1981	80%	35%
1991	80%	59%

France's share of the domestic market

	France
1981	50%
1991	30%

the lifespan of a film is curtailed in this way, the number of films has to go up. This however is increasingly difficult, given the high costs of making films (on average around fourteen to nineteen million francs for medium-budget films). Because films on the distribution circuit have a short life-expectancy they cannot hope to bring in the necessary revenue to help finance new projects, and because of this shortage of indigenous films, exhibitors turn to more US products.

A further reason for the severe difficulties faced by the French film industry is the deregulation of French television, which began in 1985 with the launch of *Canal Plus*, a subscription channel mainly devoted to films. Deregulation has also meant two more private sector terrestrial channels added to the existing three in the public sector (one of which, TF1, was privatized in 1986). There were thus five television channels from 1986 until 1992 (when one, *La Cinq*, closed down, subsequently replaced by the cultural Franco-German channel, *Arté*) competing for the same audience. All of them were bound by their charters to a quota of 50 per cent French television production. They were also bound to assure a 50 per cent quota of French films. In the first

instance (production) this has meant a significant syphoning of resources from the film industry's budget into television production. In the second instance (film quota) this has meant that the television channels with the greater audience and, therefore, greater revenue are higher in the pecking order for films than the less popular television stations. As films are sold to television in relation to their commercial value, the more popular a film is during its initial exhibition period, the higher its rights for television. In order to fulfil the quota imposition, the tendency has inevitably been to purchase cheaper products. It is also the case that eventually the film industry can no more produce enough material for this media minotaur than it could for its own exhibition venues.

To try to remedy this and inject more funds into film production, a new tax was introduced in 1986 (*taxe audiovisuelle*) on the television channels' total annual turnover. This represented a rise in the scale of their contribution to the *compte de soutien* from 8 per cent to 53 per cent – a contribution that seems enormous until one considers that it represents a mere 5.5 per cent of television's turnover.¹¹ Furthermore, because of falling audience numbers (most crucially for French films) the *compte de soutien*'s other important source of revenue, the TSA (a special additional tax)¹² decreased over the same period (from 90 per cent to 46 per cent). Thus, to a significant degree, television has taken on much of the financial burden originally shouldered by the TSA. This has enabled the fund to remain more or less the same but it has not injected any fresh funding.

One type of measure intended to protect the film industry are the 'hold-back' laws (revised in 1981) that stipulate the minimum period between a film coming out and its transfer to video (one year) and television (three years). However, these regulations were overturned by the advent of *Canal Plus* in 1985. The period was reduced to eleven months for this channel, with a knock-on effect that a concession had to be made to the terrestrial channels by which television co-productions could be broadcast after two years, although for other films the delay remained the same. In the last analysis, therefore, deregulation – although faithful to the spirit of Mitterrand's 1981 electoral manifesto – was detrimental to the film industry. It is hardly surprising that, increasingly, television channels are investing in cinematic productions. *Canal Plus*, for example, is about to become one of the industry's chief co-producers.¹³

Strategies mark two: 1988–93

Lang's first set of strategies was bold and it was during this first mandate that he implemented most of the reforms which are

¹¹ Television's total yearly contribution to production pre-1988 was FF417m; it is currently around FF756m. When one includes the pre-purchasing (*pré-achat*) for broadcasting rights, the total cost to television comes to FF2,000m.

¹² A special additional tax paid by film theatres in receipt of State subsidies – around 80% of them.

¹³ *Canal Plus*' investment in production comes to around 25% of the industry's investment in French films.

¹⁴ It is also the case that his extra function as Minister for Education kept him quite busy with, amongst other things, the reform of the Baccalauréat.

firmly in place today. Some of these have enabled the French film industry to achieve an enviable economic infrastructure, while some – as we have seen – have not brought about the anticipated results, especially in the area of audience size. François Léotard, in his two-year mandate as Minister of Culture during the ‘cohabitation’ period (1986–88 when the government was of the Right and the Presidency of the Left), interfered very little indeed with Lang’s policies and was content with lowering the budget. Lang, once back in power, immediately returned it to one per cent of the national budget.

Lang’s second mandate has been less a matter of radical reform than one of preserving what is already in place by topping-up or reforming aid where necessary.¹⁴ As a result of extending his ministerial title to include Communication, this mandate also paid more attention to the interface between television and cinema. Of the new decrees published in January 1990, the most significant for television concerned budget allocations and quotas. All channels (bar M6 which is very under-resourced) now have to set aside 3 per cent of their turnover to invest in film products. This is an extra budget allocation over and above the monies television channels already pay into the *compte de soutien* (which, as we saw, represent some 5.5 per cent of their turnover). The 50 per cent quota of French films is maintained and so too is the 50 per cent quota of French television programmes (to which channels must devote 15 per cent of their turnover). In terms of French film, export aid would go to films that either have the highest box-office returns or receive the most prestigious prizes: another interesting instance of Lang’s desire to dissolve the high/low cultural divide. A new programme of aid was put in place to foment relationships between Eastern/Central European countries and France; in particular the funding of exports, co-productions and festivals dedicated to independent Eastern and Central European cinemas.

In his belief that big-budget films are the antidote to US film imperialism, Lang put in place a new financing mechanism that is a composite of direct private funding and a public guarantee fund (the latter acting as guarantor to the former). This mechanism has generated 52.5 million francs on a yearly basis, and acts therefore as a top-up for films with budgets to the order of 50 million.¹⁵

¹⁵ In 1989, six companies invested their capital and five films benefited from this special fund.

Lang’s efforts on behalf of the industry did not succeed in reversing the slow downward spiral of the French film industry. Audience figures have continued to fall since the mid-1980s and television channels are now themselves concerned about the viability of the indigenous film product compared to the US one. For example, in October 1992, the audience for *Lethal Weapon II* (shown on TF1) virtually killed off the audience for *Cyrano de*

¹⁶ To date, Toubon has made two pronouncements concerning the industry – both at the Cannes Festival. First, that he will fight US demands for TV programmes and films to be part of the GATT agreements and second, that he will endeavour to prevent the sale of Eclair studios to a US company.

¹⁷ Even *Arté*, the new cultural channel, has refused to pick up certain independent filmmakers' work for fear of audience losses.

Bergerac in its first broadcast on France 2. As a response to this perceived crisis, Lang commissioned a report in December 1992, the *rapport Cluzel*. The findings can hardly have heartened him. According to this report, preproduction aid and pre-financing of production have led producers to inflate their budgets. Additionally, producers seem to show a fair degree of indifference to the fate of their films once they get into the cinemas because they also know, thanks to the television channels' pre-purchasing practices, that losses will be limited. The outcry from producers was predictable but the report also stands as a comment on the bad implementation of Lang's pre-financing policies. This should give some cause for concern. Given the return of the Right to power in France and the country's economic recession, cuts are highly probable.¹⁶

In summation

It is the case that some of Lang's policies have turned out not to have the positive impact hoped for. Amongst them, the two greatest disappointments have been the dissolution of the Gaumont-Pathé monopoly on the one hand and the protectionist measures taken against the video market on the other. Lang's antimonopoly policies were an attempt to democratize distribution practices. Major distributors alongside independents had to distribute auteur cinema as well as mainstream. This meant that the *Art et Essai* film theatres (hitherto specializing in showing experimental, avant-garde and auteur films) saw their identity taken away from them. Since alongside classic *Art et Essai* films these theatres had now to show less 'difficult' films, the effect was that the *Art et Essai* label lost its cachet. Even more crucially, it lost its audience which was now going to the commercial cinemas to see both mainstream and auteur films in greater comfort. In addition, the *Art et Essai* cinemas became somewhat upstaged by *Canal Plus* as a venue for showing art/independent cinema. Given its commercial success as a subscription channel, and that it is now the biggest television co-producer of French films, *Canal Plus* can afford to show a variety of films including 'obscure' or 'difficult' and auteur ones. Given also its wide-ranging audience, this channel can cater for most tastes in a way that independent film theatres can no longer.¹⁷

A further effect of this policy, which implicitly places quantity of films above other considerations, has been the increased box-office success of US cinema. French cinema lost 40 per cent of its audience, television and US movies absorbing these spectators with a concurrent drop in revenue for the French film

¹⁸ The trend in the UK could, perhaps, augur well. British audiences have doubled since the mid-1980s, indicating a disaffection with home technology (video/computer games and so on) and a return to the big screen. Once France has also had its surfeit of technology, so may its cinema audience increase once more.

industry. To counter this gloomy picture, three points need to be made. First, there are twice as many US imports as there are indigenous products, so an imbalance is inevitable.¹⁸ The second point is that the history of French audience preferences reveals a fairly regular pattern of fluctuation between a liking for American movies and a renewed appreciation for French film. Thirdly, *Art et Essai* films have found new venues and audiences in the growing number of, and interest in, film festivals around the country.

Lang's other 'big mistake', as mentioned above, was the protectionist position adopted towards the video market. This initial error of judgment goes back to the French governmental policy which attempted to block the entry into France of foreign (mostly Japanese) VCRs. This merely served to deprive the French of VCRs, since the French electronics industry was not producing them at the rate of demand. At the moment, still only one third of French households own a VCR. As a result, first, of the embargo on VCRs and, second, of the protectionist laws on video products, the use to which VCRs have been put has produced something of a cultural ghetto. The tendency has been to record films off television (including of course *Canal Plus*) rather than buy or rent commercial videos, thus incurring a loss of potential revenue for the film industry. In order to make this home use of video produce revenue for the CNC, the government has recently imposed a tax of two per cent on blank videocassettes which should generate around twenty-five to thirty million francs a year. This however is small fry considering the cost of a mid-budget film is around fourteen million francs.

While Lang's critics see him as a populist who has undermined national culture, Lang considers himself to be anti-establishment and to have brought the voices of the periphery into the centre. His detractors have argued that art has become a client of the state and as such has lost its contestatory edge. More specifically, they maintain that the SOFICAs insistence on investing in big budget films, as much as Lang's belief in these films' ability to counteract Hollywood, has been responsible for the demise of the auteur film. This is more polemic than historical fact. Auteur cinema is still a vital force of French cinema, albeit in the same relatively marginal position as before. A form of 1960s nostalgia is clearly at work here, for the age of the new wave and its two hundred new filmmakers, despite the fact that the movement did not last long.

Lang's reforms may have been too technocratic, too concentrated on economic reform at the expense of aesthetic or philosophical considerations. To Lang's claim that his policies have been focused on putting in place the reality of cinema as 'industry-art', opponents have countered that his policies stress

the former, the outcome being a standardization of the French cinema (because of a harmonization of technology and because of a move towards 'super-productions'). In actual fact, Lang's policies were probably incapable of stopping this process, given the enormous power of the US film industry over world screens.

In the final analysis, despite the various shortcomings outlined in this article, Lang has succeeded in preventing a serious erosion of the French film industry and has made it possible for it to continue to produce at the same rate as in the previous sixty years (approximately 150 films per year), something no other European country can boast of. There are two responses to the accusation that bringing capital to culture is not sufficient to create the desired cultural artefact: a cinema that attracts. The first concerns the role of television. As television has become increasingly one of the largest contributors to the cinema industry's coffers, so it has had an impact on the film product. In this respect no Minister of Culture can affect change. French cinema is indeed making more films that have a 'made for television' look (fast pace, predominance of medium closeups to medium shots, and so on). It is also true that many of the new generation of filmmakers to break into cinema in the early 1980s trained in television and advertising. The second response and one that is germane to this last point is that Lang's policies have also addressed the future in terms of training. A new film school has been set up in Paris, the *Fondation européenne pour les métiers de l'image et du son* (FEMIS) at the *Palais de Tokyo*, about to be renamed the Palais Jean Renoir. This school, which opened in 1986, takes over and enlarges upon the functions of the *Institut des hautes études cinématographiques* (IDHEC), established in 1946. As well as training students in film, video and television, there is an interface between theory and practice. A number of training schemes (seven in all) have also been established in the provinces. But these are recent departures and the measure of their success is yet to come. The 1990s could see the renaissance of French cinema in the best sense of the word. That is, that it be both popular and creative. That is, also, that Lang's policies might in the end prove to have been bold, innovative and to have given the French film industry (which almost since its birth has complained of its ill-health) a financial structure and a framework for creative vitality, enabling it to keep its place as the only European cinema to weather both the recession and competition from Hollywood.

An interview with Fereydoun Hoveyda

ROBERT LANG

Fereydoun Hoveyda belongs to the group of influential film critics at Cahiers du cinéma who developed the politique des auteurs in the 1950s. Alongside his more famous colleagues who turned into the directors of the new wave – Godard, Truffaut, Rohmer, Rivette and Chabrol – he was a key force in Cahiers' elaboration of auteurism, in particular in foregrounding the role of mise-en-scene, as seen in his celebrated review (published in May 1960) of Nicholas Ray's Party Girl: 'What constitutes the essence of cinema is nothing other than mise-en-scene. It is through this that everything on the screen is expressed, transforming, as if by magic, a screenplay written by someone else and imposed on the director into something which is truly the film of an auteur'.

Hoveyda now lives in New York, where he was interviewed by Robert Lang about his time at Cahiers and his views on the contemporary French cinema, especially that of his former fellow critics. The extracts from Hoveyda's interview reproduced below clearly show him as detached from the French scene of the 1950s and early 1960s by more than a thirty-year span and the Atlantic. His pessimism about contemporary French and US films may be seen as the work of (inevitable?) nostalgia for the seductive atmosphere of Cahiers' heyday. At the same time, Hoveyda's evaluation of the journal's legacy on filmmaking and film criticism does not lack a critical edge.

RL: What were you doing in Paris during the fifties and sixties?

FH: Between 1952 and 1966 I was working with UNESCO as an international civil servant. I was interested in movies. Throughout the fifties I went to the cinema almost every evening.

RL: Among the people we associate with the new wave, who did you see most of?

FH: Truffaut, Rohmer, Godard, Chabrol, and Rivette almost daily, in the afternoons and evenings. Sometimes I'd also see, twice or three times a day, people out of that group who were Leftists involved in political activities, like [Ado] Kyrrou and Pierre Kast. Occasionally, I'd see some of the filmmakers who were from another generation, like Autant-Lara.

RL: I'm told that all the people associated with the new wave were poor in those days

FH: Yes. I was the richest among them, because I had my salary from UNESCO. Domarchi was also rich because he was a Professor of Law at the University of Dijon. We'd all drink a lot of wine and talk about cinema, politics, social issues, everything. Those among us who were professional critics would see the movies in the afternoon. Others who were working in day jobs, like Domarchi and myself, would see movies after six then join the others in a bistro and talk. Or we would have meetings between five and seven-thirty at the *Cahiers* office on the Champs Elysées. There were two desks, a table, and a few filing cabinets for the stills but not enough chairs, so you had to sit on the table.

RL: How did you decide who would write about which films?

FH: We would meet every day to talk about the movies showing that week. The one who felt the most about a movie would be given it to write about. You wrote about a movie if you liked it, except occasionally when we thought it absolutely necessary as a group to attack a movie. Then, the one who felt most passionately against it would write the piece. This, I think, explains why the reviews and articles in *Cahiers* had more impact. They were written by people who felt strongly about what they were writing about. Sometimes, we would have two reviews expressing two different evaluations of the same movie. Occasionally, even more than two, as in the case of Hitchcock's *The Trouble with Harry*, but we would only write about movies that appeared to us important or worth writing about for one reason or another. Often, I wouldn't write anything for a month. But I also had a permanent monthly slot in a science fiction magazine called *Fiction*, so I had to see all the science fiction movies released in France. My readers would often get upset because I was very, very critical of them. I loved the science fiction film genre, but out of twenty or thirty features a year, only two or three were worth speaking about. I also wrote from time to time for *Positif*, but I stopped because it became so

politicized at one point. They demonized *Cahiers du cinéma*, calling it Rightist, backward, and politically conservative, which it was not. Domarchi was a Marxist; we had Leftists of all kinds; and we also had people who were Rightist. A real mix. So, at one point, I had words with my friends at *Positif*, and ceased to write for them. For *Positif* and for *Fiction*, I had a pen name, 'Hoda'. Occasionally, I used a pen name at *Cahiers*, 'Fred Carson' – because of Kit Carson. All my American friends, you see, called me Fred. Fereydoun was too long. I never wrote about politics; I wrote about science fiction, detective novels, and things like that.

RL: But you had this full-time job at UNESCO.

FH: It was easy for me; I had the weekends. And I started writing novels then. My first novel was actually a film idea which I couldn't find a producer for, because it was too complicated, *Les Quarantaines*. Then I wrote other novels, and so on, until I was offered a job back at the Foreign Ministry in Iran. I spent six years there but it was an empty period for me, because there wasn't the same intellectual life as in Paris. I found that intellectual life again when I settled in New York, even though I was an Ambassador, which took a lot of time. I've been living here permanently since 1971. What interested me in New York, from my very first visit, was the avant-garde theatre. I first discovered New York because of Rossellini. He came here to present *The Rise to Power of Louis XIV* at the New York Film Festival. He was invited one Saturday afternoon to see some avant-garde movies. We went together, and that was how I came to meet Andy Warhol, who was showing *Sleep*. After we'd been sitting there for a while, Rossellini nudged me in the dark and whispered, 'Let's get out of here!' He had no interest in the avant-garde cinema! At least, not that kind.

RL: And yet you found the Andy Warhol phenomenon interesting.

FH: Oh, yes, we became very good friends. I also met Bob Wilson around that time. He really impressed me. What he was doing was so cinematic. Three or four of the things he put together, like *Einstein on the Beach* and *The Time and Life of Stalin* were my ideas.

RL: Does it all seem long ago?

FH: We could call this discussion 'Remembrance of Things Past'. I feel as if I am walking in a cemetery. Some of my friends from the *Cahiers* are already dead – Truffaut, Domarchi, Pierre Kast, to name but a few. Others are ageing.

RL: Yet, thirty five years ago, a group of young directors invaded the screens of Paris with movies that were exciting, new

FH: They were different from the usual productions on at least two counts. First, they were low-budget films shot entirely in natural settings. Second, the stories they told were personal, almost autobiographical. But in fact, the only thing these new directors shared was their relative youth. Their tastes and preoccupations differed widely. By the mid-sixties, except for Godard and Rivette and Rohmer, they were all part of the normal circuit of filmmaking.

RL: It was a shortlived movement.

FH: Yes, but it left an imprint on French and world cinema. The movement revolutionized both filmmaking and film appreciation. It propelled a new theory of cinema, lifted the place of film among other arts, and set off an important critical debate around the world. Although I feel proud of having been part of the movement, I must confess that while contributing to the *Cahiers*, I was not aware of the future importance of what I wrote. I was having fun watching over two hundred movies a year. I had no idea I was discovering new principles of teaching audiences how to look at the screen. But now, looking back, and reading all the compliments, I realize that *Cahiers* had a share in the evolution of cinema.

RL: Tell me about the evolution of your own relationship to the cinema.

FH: It was the early fifties in Paris. I used to go to Henri Langlois' tiny *cinémathèque* screening-room on avenue de Méssine almost every evening in order to see films I had missed or I had watched as a child. I met everybody there, including André Bazin who founded *Cahiers*. When Bazin invited Truffaut and his friends to write for the *Cahiers*, they asked me to join them. In those days, the French cinema was dominated by a number of scriptwriters, namely the team of Aurenche and Bost, and more-or-less Leftist directors, like Autant-Lara, LeChanois, Clément and Clouzot, who proclaimed a kind of realism in the name of fidelity to the literary authors they were adapting, which in fact had nothing to do with reality. Some older masters, like René Clair, were still working. With the exception of a handful of filmmakers like Bresson, Renoir, and Cocteau, the French cinema used to hide its hollowness behind the names of great literary authors, a certain quality of the images, and literary dialogue. Russian cinema was at the peak of Stalin's cult of personality. German cinema did not exist. As for the British

cinema, it was theatrical, verbose, and boring, except for a few humorous films. The only interesting films were the new Italian neorealist ones, and of course the Hollywood movies. For us, cinema was essentially the art of action, by which we meant that cinema should not be discursive or literary. Through action film adventures, American movies appealed to us, and we loved the way they conveyed at the same time a kind of philosophy, without insisting heavily they had something to say. We considered the so-called escapist Hollywood products to be more directly engaged with reality than the French cinema.

RL: You were accused at the time of being misled by your lack of knowledge of English.

FH: They were blind to facts! Let me cite one example. The first and only time French cinema dealt with the nuclear bomb was with *Hiroshima mon amour*, the 1959 Resnais film, while most of Hollywood science fiction movies since 1947 evoked this question in some way. At any rate, it was one of the innovations of the *Cahiers* to consider Hollywood directors as artists.

RL: The '*politique des auteurs*'?

FH: Indeed, it was a *politique* more than a theory. Truffaut and Rivette were its main proponents. They considered their preferred directors to be almost infallible authors who could never make a bad film. Another principle is the assumption that the author progresses from one film to another, so that his most recent film is always better and greater than his previous one.

RL: You sound as though you don't agree.

FH: Obviously, many of us did not follow Truffaut to such extremist views. We only shared some of the points of the theory, namely the reaction against the impressionistic evaluation of films, which continues to be at the basis of most American reviews, overflowing with adjectives like, 'superior', 'touching', 'brilliant', 'amazing', 'flat', 'terrific', 'deceiving', 'vibrant', and so on. In the end, the impressionist critics succeed in making their adjectives completely meaningless. What I did not know when I came to the United States in the late sixties was that critics like Vincent Canby follow the *politique des auteurs*. He lauded every Godard and Woody Allen movie. Only recently, has he finally rejected some of them.

RL: So, at last, he shares André Bazin's more balanced judgement?

FH: A year before he died, Bazin wrote: 'The *politique des auteurs* seems to me to hold and defend an essential critical truth, that the cinema needs defence more than the other arts

precisely because an act of true artistic creation is more uncertain and vulnerable in the cinema than elsewhere. But its exclusive practice leads to another danger – the negation of the film to the benefit of praise of its author. It should be complemented by other approaches.’ That is exactly what some of my friends and I tried to do by introducing in our reviews the concept of mise-en-scene.

RL: What did you mean by mise-en-scene?

FH: If it is, as I submit, the process of creativity in the cinematic world, it cannot be defined. The only thing one can do is to give examples on precise points. The simplest I can give here is from one of the best Capra comedies of the thirties, *It Happened One Night*. As we know, Gable was an actor who could not easily change the expression on his face. Take the scene in which he should show his anger and disappointment over the marriage of Claudette Colbert to a playboy. Capra could not spend more than a minute for that purpose. So, he chose to place the camera behind the armchair in which Gable was looking at a newspaper photograph of Claudette Colbert and her fiancé. On the table was an almost-empty bottle of whisky and an ashtray full of half-smoked cigarettes. Thus, in a few seconds, the message was conveyed without showing Gable’s face. We proposed that the essence of a film is to be found in its mise-en-scene. But the *politique des auteurs* has had its day. It was merely a staging post on the road towards a new criticism. The only thing which has remained is that the director should be considered as the author of the film. And the new criticism was bound to question not only the *politique des auteurs*, but also some of André Bazin’s ideas about the ontology of the photographic image and the realistic nature of cinema. For me, cinema was not representing reality but only signifying it.

RL: Did the new wave directors actually translate these ideas into their films?

FH: Thirty-five years later, as a former *Cahiers* editor, I must confess that I have no definite answer. Looking back at some of my friends’ first movies, I find in them the freshness and the influence of their ideas but most of the following movies made by the so-called new wave directors were far from being up to the standards that they themselves had set in the fifties. Mainly because the audiences did not recognize themselves in the movies of the young directors who had, in a way, perverted Rossellini’s lessons of the mid-forties. They were using neo-realism not to show real people but their fantasies, which were not shared by their peers. Even Jean Domarchi, a member of the editorial board of the *Cahiers*, publically criticized his friends in a violent

article published in one of the fashionable weeklies. Another occasional *Cahiers* writer, Marcorelles, wrote an article entitled, 'Autopsy of the New Wave', as if it was dead, pointing to Godard's *Le Petit soldat*, which is full of confusion as a story. Alexandre Astruc, who coined the term, *la caméra-stylo*, found a simple reason to explain the fiasco of the new wave. He said, 'One cannot eternally write and rewrite his first novel'. One must one day get to a second stage in which one would tell honestly a story outside one's own memories and autobiography. Truffaut himself, in a 1962 interview, recognized the difficulties of the new wave. He attributed the failure of the new wave to the fact that normal film producers had no interest in encouraging low-budget films because they lived mainly on their high salaries. In his view, each new film should contain some element of classical cinema in order to accommodate the public. Indeed, most of the new wave directors compromised very rapidly with the industry and/or became part of it. Nevertheless, one can always find in their movies some spark of their previous thinking. Chabrol, Malle, and to some extent Truffaut himself rapidly became professional directors who played by the industry rules. Their movies were usually better than others', but it was only a difference degree. Only Godard, Rohmer and Rivette have remained outside the mainstream.

RL: What makes those three distinctive?

FH: Godard has innovated especially in the field of editing, but after *Breathless*, he did not bother to create a style and remained mainly at the level of experimentation. In a way, his films are not real films. They are the drafts of films never produced. What he shows the viewer looks more like notes about a movie to be made. We have before us a mass of ideas and images, some good, some bad. Like Jean Rouch's, Godard's movies give the impression of being unfinished products, raw materials waiting for someone to give them their final form. In technical terms, Godard's films look to me like rushes. Rivette is following his own course and making movies for limited audiences, according to his own ideas and aesthetics. He is probably the only member of the *Cahiers* of the fifties and the sixties who has remained faithful to his own writings. As for Rohmer, he succeeded in creating a distinct style which is more on the literary side.

RL: What about the influence of the *Cahiers*/new wave on the American cinema?

FH: One has to recognize that the movement launched by the *Cahiers* in the fifties has had a wide influence on world cinema. *The New York Times* published the announcement of Truffaut's death on the front page, in two columns, as a major piece of

information. Only a few artists have had that honour. Indeed, in many countries, in the mid-sixties, young filmmakers, picking up the precedent of the new wave, threw their hats in the arena of cinema, and offered personal movies produced away from big studios and with limited budgets. The impact of the new wave was felt even in the United States, where the late Aram Avakian's first feature, *End of the Road*, together with *Easy Rider*, *Putney Swope*, *Medium Cool*, *Last Summer*, and some others, represented a breed of mainly dropout films. In 1973, with *American Graffiti*, I thought that our ideas of the fifties were finally implanted in the US. Unhappily, Lucas, like the other innovators of the late sixties and early seventies, was swallowed by the industry, and the American counterpart of the new wave was as shortlived as the French.

RL: But, as you've said, the impact of the movement was, or has been, undeniable.

FH: Today, when I think about our hopes of the fifties, I must recognize that they were far from being fulfilled. To paraphrase the French proverb, I would say that the mountain gave birth to a mouse. The new wave has melted into the mainstream of the industry, and the French cinema has returned to the very norms that Truffaut and our other friends were bitterly criticizing. I guess that the development of television and other radio techniques has had something to do with the death of the new wave. With the rapid expansion of television audiences, cinemas have to present more spectacular products designed for wide screens. Moreover, new laws have been laid for cinema, which remind one of Indian and Egyptian movies. These follow a certain pattern imposed by the studios in order to accommodate the audiences. Every ten minutes or so the action is cut to present songs or dances. Indian filmmakers used to call this 'the law'.

RL: And what is today's 'law' in filmmaking, either in Hollywood or France?

FH: First, the movie should cover two hours. Second, it should contain at least one explicit love scene. Third, it should have some rock music. Fourth, the dialogue should be what is called 'adult language'. Indeed, no matter what the subject is, you cannot avoid these 'musts'. Add to them violence and brutality, and you will understand why the ratings are generally 'R'. Curiously enough, compared to theatrical films, the movies made for television seem to offer more possibilities to auteurs, inasmuch as they force the directors to invent cinematographic effects in order to tell the story rapidly – as at least half an hour out of the two is devoted to commercials.

RL: So, it's a mixed legacy.

FH: As we envisaged the new wave at *Cahiers* in the late fifties, the new cinema has died a long time ago. But something positive remains as its legacy. Although we did not change all the processes of filmmaking, we were nevertheless able to promote new talents, and more important, we definitely influenced the ways in which people looked at the movies. Our efforts did not completely fail. Moreover, the rapid development of new technologies augurs tremendously well. One should not abandon all hopes for the future of a more personalized cinema. My only regret is that I do not see any young group which would remind me of the one we put together in the fifties around the *Cahiers du cinéma*.

This interview is an edited version of two conversations between Fereydoon Hoveyda and Robert Lang.

reports

Console-ing Passions: Television, Video, and Feminism Conference, Los Angeles, 2–4 April, 1993

After the success of last year's conference at the University of Iowa, Console-ing Passions returned in 1993 at the University of Southern California, providing an inspiring, provocative and open forum for television studies and feminist criticism. The variety of topics and critical methods displayed this year foregrounded the important developments in and diversity of research that characterize contemporary television studies. The conference was well organized, combining conventional panels, workshops, and screenings of video art, with presentations by industry professionals, to explore the boundaries of feminist participation in the field of video and television. This year's work drew on a wide spectrum of shows, and featured panels and discussion sessions devoted to pedagogy and independent and mainstream television production to underline the need for a closer relationship between theory and practice.

One of the underlying themes of the conference – a move towards a more critically self-reflexive analysis – emerged in the opening plenary session, a group discussion panel on 'Teaching TV and Popular Culture'. Participants Robert Allen, Todd Boyd, George Lipsitz, Constance Penley, Beverley Seckinger, and Mimi White stressed how our research problems and concerns are shaped by the same social, economic, and institutional forces that mould our professional lives. Robert Allen called for excellence in introductory classes to communicate the value of our work to university administrators and

undergraduates alike, and to counter the depressing institutional and economic pressures currently threatening the expansion of television studies. On a more personal note, Todd Boyd focused on his experiences as a university professor and as an African-American man in a predominantly white society to explore how students articulate assumptions about identity, race, gender and power in the classroom. Observing how student (and professorial) tastes and prejudices inflect aesthetic and critical judgments, Boyd reflected on the political implication of our roles as teachers and our attempts to counter students' beliefs about 'art' and the canon – hierarchies that generally exclude nonwestern, minority, or popular African-American cultures such as jazz and rap. In a similar vein, Constance Penley's talk, 'Pedagogies of Porn', examined how social prejudices affect the classroom and curriculum. While she had initially decided to offer a film studies class on pornography to counter student misconceptions about feminism and pornography, Penley found herself and her students embroiled in a greater social controversy, as objects of an attack led by the Santa Barbara Citizens Against Pornography. Penley incorporated this cultural context within the class, observing that this fracas made the students feel part of an outside world where their research had some social and political efficacy. All the presenters demonstrated how teaching television can, and should, provide students and teachers alike with a greater awareness that education, particularly media studies, cannot be confined in an ivory tower. Indeed, the knowledges and tastes that define the very artistic canons used to attack media studies are as socially determined as the texts we study, the interpretations we generate, and the larger critical perspectives we bring into the classroom.

Increased self-awareness also emerged as

an important development in critical studies. In particular, Henry Jenkins and Anne Gray gave papers devoted to a critical analysis of their previous work, rethinking their earlier positions in a more self-reflexive manner. Jenkins started his paper, 'Out of the Closet and into the Universe: Queers, *Star Trek* and Gene Roddenberry', by positioning himself within the *Star Trek* fan culture, and progressed onto a less celebratory analysis of fandom than he presented in his book *Textual Poachers*. Focusing on the activities of Gaylaxion, a Boston-based gay and lesbian fan group, Jenkins called for more representations of gays and gay culture on television, concluding that in the face of dominantly heterosexual media images, 'resistance is not enough'. Despite its largely positive reception within the gay and lesbian community, Jenkins' analysis of the few supposedly gay-oriented episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* revealed that any sexually ambivalent character would ultimately be denoted as completely heterosexual, expelling the treatment of homosexual desire to the realm of connotation. Although this strategy leaves texts open for resistant readings, particularly within fan cultures, Jenkins stressed that these interpretations must not be overvalored as long as the crucial problem of television's nonrepresentation of gay lifestyles remains. Anne Gray similarly subjected her recent book to critical re-evaluation in her presentation, 'Video Playtime and Other Passions'. Framing her work and her role as an ethnographic researcher in the context of changed methodologies, Gray drew on her experience of trying to rewrite her empirical work in the light of cultural studies theories about the impossibility of defining television audiences. Gray used autobiography to argue for a more self-reflexive stance, one which does not dispense with ethnographic work but which

rewrites this practice to foreground and question the differences between the researcher and the researched. This more critical approach was perhaps most thoroughly evidenced in Lynn Spigel's 'Barbies without Ken'. Spigel analyzed the phenomenon of adults (like herself) who collect Barbie dolls to raise questions about intellectuals studying popular culture. Observing that the move to self-critique might provide feminists with a possible way to negotiate or to evade the valorization or condemnation of popular culture, Spigel warned that this negotiation might be a tricky endeavour, given the strategic defences and rejections of pop culture, and the difficulties entailed in stepping out of our own identities. Through her analysis of the cultural ambivalence of Barbie dolls and the artifacts of Barbie fan culture, Spigel advocated interrogation of the place of popular culture and our terms of analysis, reminding us that the popular is not just one bloc(k) but a 'fragmented group of divided interests' and divided categories.

Certainly, Spigel's call had already been heralded by many conference presenters, who subjected older methods of history, theory and empirical work to thorough re-evaluation. This concept of the popular as a 'fragmented group of divided interests' was demonstrated in Sunday's panel on 'Television on Trial: Race, Sex, and Justice', which was devoted to critical readings of the media in the Anita Hill and Rodney King cases and their aftermaths. John Fiske focused on the articulation of racial and gendered categories and politics in the Anita Hill case, observing how Hill's gender made her a powerful figure for white feminists, while her race positioned her a traitor for African-American men and women alike – a scorned woman who would destroy a black man's chance for political success, in the process almost rendering herself 'white'. For Fiske, the

discourse surrounding Anita Hill demonstrated how black women are ultimately rendered invisible through the articulation of gender and race as opposed categories, as conflicting discourses serving different political ends which tend to present the alignment of 'black' and 'woman' as culturally impossible. Laura Grindstaff also focused on Anita Hill in an analysis of *Public Hearings, Private Pain*, a PBS documentary marking the first anniversary of the Hill/Thomas hearing. Like Fiske, Grindstaff explored how the public figure of Anita Hill came to embody the antagonism of categories of race and gender, particularly for the African-American community, where the power and taboos of racial and sexual differences are inextricably linked. Grindstaff explored how her race actually disempowered Hill's gender, even as it ensured that she too was a victim of racism, as the Hill/Thomas case became rewritten as a narrative of (black male) lynching, allowing Thomas to obscure his conservatism. In this context, Grindstaff observed that the racial discourse becomes empowered by being positioned as male, while gender loses force as it is positioned as white.

While these analyses focused on the figure of Anita Hill as a site for the dissolution of fixed categories, other papers called for a synthesis of previously separate categories, theories, and methodologies. For example, Caren Kaplan advocated a synthesis of feminist and anticolonialist theories in her reading of the manipulation and containment of Ricky Ricardo/Desi Arnaz's Cuban identity in *I Love Lucy*. Kaplan examined how the social and political context of the 'Good Neighbor' policies during the 1950s shaped Arnaz's position of 'devoted adopted son'. Although the textual features of the sitcom managed and contained his ethnicity, Lucy's performance undermined Arnaz's control by

playing on the racism of 1950s audiences. At the same time, Kaplan argued that this performance inscribed the mutual dependency of Lucy and Ricky in accordance with larger social and political imperatives generated by the US 'Good Neighbor' policies towards South and Central America.

While many of the papers focused on a synthesis of history and theory to reposition and recontextualize various television shows and the positions from which we write, this project took many forms and did not result in an abandonment of other methodologies, such as ethnography, theory, and textual analysis. The diversity of approaches was matched only by the variety of topics covered, which included studies of television news, new technologies, global women's programmes, lesbian and gay aesthetics, teenage-girl culture, morphing, sitcoms, children's culture, fan studies, documentary, reproductive politics, and MTV. Many papers contributed to television studies by uncovering 'forgotten' television shows, such as *Bride and Groom*, *Woman Speaks*, and 1950s local cooking shows, exploring the history of television programming in relation to its address to women. Perhaps the most significant development, however, came in the conference's more global focus. Television studies has been criticized for collapsing 'television' into 'US television' and, while many papers *did* cover US shows, global programming and reception were quite prominently featured. Similarly, many participants traveled from other countries, most notably Britain, making this conference a particularly fertile site for both crosscultural debate and for the recovery of television's larger global, historic, and cultural diversity.

Moya Luckett

**The Society for Cinema Studies
Conference, New Orleans, 11–14
February 1993**

The Society for Cinema Studies convened its thirty-third annual meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana. As indicated by the choice of a special conference focus, 'Open Channels: Film, Television, and Multimedia', the organization has expanded and crossed a number of conceptual and intellectual boundaries since its incorporation. The Society has also greatly grown and diversified in membership, bringing both the excitement of change and the pragmatic problems of organizing events for five hundred conferees, presenters, and filmmakers. Emphasizing the pre-Mardi Gras setting as much as the presentation of papers, the conference hosts created an atmosphere of good feeling that diminished minor problems and encouraged participation. The carnival temptations of the French Quarter notwithstanding, the formal gathering itself offered a veritable 'conference of attractions' with far more panels, screenings, workshops, receptions, tours, and exhibits than any single participant could take in.

Nevertheless, a sampling of sessions and a perusal of the conference programme revealed several changes and discernible trends in the way 'cinema studies' is being conducted. Foremost among these was the clear expansion of the locus of study. Obviously the conference and the field of film studies in general have been addressing television/video for a number of years. Few scholars insist on specialization. However, by making what organizers termed 'a special gesture toward new work on television', this year's meeting tried to emphasize that expansion. The degree to which it succeeded is debatable. Several participants doing research on television mentioned still feeling 'ghettoized', clustered off to the side. The fact that only

about one panel in ten focused specifically on television topics seemed to support that sentiment.

If this year's conference underrepresented television, it brought out its share of discussion on new technologies. Words relatively new to the English language – hypertext, e-sources, nanotechnologies, virtual-reality, digital sampling – were already central to several examinations of these emerging computer-based, multimedia technologies. While the number of 'new tech' papers was relatively small, their inclusion cast a light of redefinition on the field calling itself 'cinema studies'. How do we theorize 'cinema' in this brave new world where manipulatable text/image/sound (touch?) arrive and depart instantaneously from screens in our homes and offices? As the workshop 'E-Sources in Media Studies: The Use of Electronic Journals and Bulletin Boards' suggested on day one, scholars are already assimilating these interactive technologies in their institutional life. Commercial versions of them made a giant leap forward in 1993 as well. Mark J. Wolf's appropriately titled paper, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction', suggested many of the issues and new sets of questions we face in a world where moving-image texts and technology are so fundamentally altered. With the centennial of cinema's invention upon us, we may well soon be looking back at 'the movies' as a phenomenon peculiar to our twentieth-century past. 'Whither cinema studies?' can only become an increasingly contested question as the answer to 'What is cinema?' changes so rapidly.

Whether or not we stand at some definable crossroads in the historical development of cinema, its present and past states are being well investigated. Another discernible trend in the orientation of SCS presentations was a new level of comfort with and integration of theory and

history. Many have noted that the boom in film history scholarship in the 1980s appeared as a counterweight to the prematurely formed film theory of the 1970s. Happily, the SCS of the 1990s appears to have created a meeting place where theoretical work is done with more historical specificity, and where a wealth of historical research has generated theories of film historiography. At least three full panels were devoted to the latter. As to the former, Tarmo Malmberg's 'The Rise of Film Semiotics, 1960–1964' served as one example of how theoretical schools are being historicized; Miriam Hansen's 'Pre-classical and Post-classical Spectatorship' stood out as an even more far-reaching one. She discussed how influential theories of spectatorship assumed a classical-era mode of reception, making them less than appropriate for studies of early and recent cinema.

While historical revisions and particularisms constituted much of the work presented, the broad theoretical concerns evident in earlier meetings of SCS remained. Psychoanalysis, feminism, postmodernism, queer theory, the politics of representation, and the construction of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality; all continued to predominate, receiving a host of applications to specific texts and contexts. At their root, most were investigations of the relationship between ideology and media images/practices: how are they mutually constructed? 'Construction' seemed to be the prevailing key word in paper titles: 'The Construction of . . .' Ethnicity, Malcolm X, Gender, Cultural Identity, Cinematic Value, Feminist Positions. ('So many "construction sites" I thought I was at an architecture convention', a first-time conferee remarked.)

Discussion of these schools of theory have been the norm at SCS, but this year's assembly seemed ready to look for

something beyond them. Whether it was due to an instinctive search for the new or a disenchantment with so-called SLAB theory, there was a sense of a field trying to readjust, to find a new way to look at what Hansen called 'New Publics, Old Questions'. No unified field theories were articulated, but it might be said that the new and the old manifested themselves in coexisting attempts to increase local and global perspectives.

Localism was generally a path for alternatives, hope, change, or at least resistance; globalism, an unfortunately but increasingly common characteristic of media forces in the modern world. Studies of the local were both historical (for example, panels on 'US Regional Television History' and 'Local Film Promotion') and contemporary (several sessions on the Rodney King video and the 'Los Angeles Rebellion' were among the most valuable). Clearly the hope of the conference organizers was that inviting papers and productions on the 'open channels' of new media environments would generate ideas about how practical access for diverse voices could be achieved. Some, like Helen DiMichiel's 'Toward a Sustainable Media: New Paradigms for Film and Video in the Nineties', did just that, showing concrete examples of community-based projects that enabled citizens to engage the 'public sphere' (another term much in favour).

However the global overpowered the local. Mark Wolf's paper, which preceded DiMichiel's, painted a frightening version of the implications of new technologies which are supposed to provide access. 'The smaller the technology, the larger the corporation', was a generalization he posited. Wolf also pointed out that, while microdevices and computer networks might put more resources into the hands of individuals, 'the means of reproducing the means of reproduction' are still in the hands of huge corporate forces. Others also

made the case for the overwhelming globalization of film and mass media. Tino Balio delivered a succinct summary in 'Hollywood in the 1980s: The Globalization of the Entertainment Industries'. Moreover, the concept was made key to the conference's dynamics by way of a plenary session devoted to 'Origins without Borders: Television, Cultural Formations, and Global Identity'. From this macro-perspective, questions about textual analysis, interpretation, and local reception are dwarfed by the ramifications of what world leaders now constantly refer to as 'the global economy'. In the post-Cold War world, where capital and culture move fluidly across former national borders, issues of political economy, of haves and have-nots, seem more pressing than ever.

The subject of nations and national cinemas indeed received considerable attention. While US and European media got their share of attention, it was refreshing to see that SCS's increased ranks also led to more research on the cinemas of Latin America, Africa, and Asia and the Pacific. Consistent with changes in the daily political headlines, many scholars grappled with the meaning of nation and identity in this era that is not only post-colonial but in some ways post-national. The elusiveness of national identity was perhaps most evident where theory and practice converged: special blocs of screenings and discussion by new 'working groups' were devoted to 'post-Soviet', 'post-socialist', Yugoslav, and Eastern European cinemas.

In fact, the multitude of film and video screenings illuminated these 'global versus local' issues as tellingly as any papers. The number of films was greater than at past conferences, with films devoted to Louisiana and New Orleans accompanying a wide international representation of shorts and features. With screenings and panels running concurrently, audiences were attracted by having several caucuses

(Latino, Asian-Pacific American, African/African-American, student, and so on) programme selections. The combination of growing caucus interests and film/video makers showing their work seemed to help break through anxieties about multi-culturalism and diversity felt at some recent meetings. SCS has substantially diversified its membership and emphasized this without any 'balkanization' – a Serb and a Croat director even convened to show and discuss their films in remembrance of 'the former Yugoslavia'.

Finally, an important note must be made regarding the conference's efforts on professional issues. It is ironic that, just at the time the Society for Cinema Studies has reached a new level of membership and participation, the professional possibilities for working film and television scholars are contracting. The annual meeting has grown so large that subgroups have planned their own meetings (on feminism and television, Oscar Micheaux, animation, documentary, music, and so on). Publication of media books and journals continues to grow. Yet, at least in the US, an anticipated growth in teaching jobs has been met instead by contraction. Anxiety was expressed in informal discussion and in workshops that much of this may be part of what economists are telling us is 'structural unemployment'. Several state university systems have eliminated existing media studies programmes; others are hiring only visiting, part-time, or temporary instructors. Unable to predict the future, one can only hope that the film scholar of tomorrow is not treated as migrant labour in the middle of the academy's austerity. The vitality and diversity of the work presented at the annual SCS meeting suggests the possibilities that would be lost.

Dan Streible

reviews

review article:

T. Jefferson Kline, *Screening the Text. Intertextuality in New Wave French Cinema*, (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). 308 pp.

René Prédal, *Le Cinéma français depuis 1945*, (Paris: Nathan, 1991). 568 pp.

Jacques Siclier, *Le Cinéma français*, two volumes, (Paris: Ramsay, 1990, 1991). 295 pp., 309 pp.

Alan Williams, *Republic of Images. A History of French Filmmaking*, (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1992). 458 pp.

JILL FORBES

The French cinema continues to attract substantial audiences in the English-speaking world, it figures regularly on film studies programmes, and it is increasingly seen as an integral part of French studies. Yet until recently the student – or the interested filmgoer – had few synoptic studies with which to complement the vast literature devoted to individual films and selected ‘movements’ such as the new wave. Roy Armes’s *French Cinema* (1985) reigned unchallenged as the only attempt, in English, to write the history of French cinema since the beginning, although the virtually simultaneous publication of Richard Abel’s altogether more scholarly, more thorough, and more intellectually stimulating work on early French cinema set new standards and opened up new possibilities for more detailed studies of parts of French film history.

On their side, the French have perhaps been even more

reluctant to write the history of their own cinema, inhibited, it may be surmised, by Georges Sadoul's brilliant, exasperating and, above all, partial *Histoire du cinéma français* (which was in any case published in 1962), as well as by the notoriously faction-ridden atmosphere prevailing both in the industry and among the critics. Even the postwar period had only stimulated sporadic attempts at synthesis, most notably Jean-Pierre Jeancolas's *Le Cinéma des Français La V^e République* (1958–78) (1979). This meant that although much was written about French cinema, contemporary and otherwise, not much was of a kind to be either materially or intellectually accessible, except to readers firmly entrenched in a Parisian context of screenings and academic debates.

The books reviewed here all show a new willingness to look at French cinema as more than the sum of film parts. None is a study of the industry *per se*, but all (with the possible exception of Kline) have the evolution of the industry as the implicit, and occasionally explicit, context in which their discussion of French cinema is placed. Indeed, it is the sense of impending crisis, the notion that French cinema might be entering its final phase, which has undoubtedly rendered more urgent the task of ordering and defining its past. Of course, the French cinema has been in crisis since World War I (what European cinema has not?), but the end of the 1980s saw a qualitative difference. The collapse of film attendances, the vast expansion of scheduled television hours, the spread of video ownership combined with a pervasive sense of crisis in cultural identity, exemplified in essays such as Alain Finkielkraut's *La Défaite de la pensée*, but also in uncertainties about European integration, or the role of immigrant communities, all contributed to the sense of cultural doom. Those who study the cinema are not immune from this general *sinistrose*. Indeed, the recent issue of *CinémAction*, devoted to the 'strengths and weaknesses of French cinema', is suffused with an almost unmitigated pessimism. But it is also, no doubt, the sense that an era is coming to a close that has awakened the desire to look back over history and to marshal, in some readily comprehensible fashion, the achievements of the past.

The two volumes of Jacques Siclier's *Le Cinéma français* are lavish, well-illustrated, and generously paginated although, alas, this puts them beyond the reach of all but the deepest of pockets. The volumes have all the strengths of Siclier's criticism for *Le Monde* and some of its weaknesses too. This is a writer who dislikes being anything but positive, a character trait which allowed him, in *La France de Pétain et son cinéma* (1981), to point to the considerable continuities between French cinema of the 1930s and 1940s and to undermine the view that widespread collaboration with the occupying forces had taken place. Perhaps

Siclier is exceptionally close to the industry. Certainly, his antipathy towards selection or arbitration means that he discusses, albeit with greater or lesser enthusiasm, filmmakers or genres ignored or rapidly skirted round elsewhere. The work is organized into four chronological periods – 1944–58, 1958–68 (Volume 1), 1968–81, 1981–1990 (Volume 2) – the logic of which is postwar French political history. However, unlike Jean-Pierre Jeancolas he does not see the sociopolitical dimension as having a major impact on filmmaking, except with respect to the 1981–90 period where he does suggest that the media policies of the successive Socialist governments of the 1980s adversely affected the cinema. However, Siclier omits to point out that a media policy which simultaneously expanded the number of television channels and hours broadcast but failed to beef up production to fill them meant that the film industry, as Luc Besson's films demonstrate, quickly had to start imitating television in order to survive.

Within these chronological subdivisions Siclier attempts to discuss the interesting filmmakers and movements. His evenhandedness permits an agreeably heterodox approach and one which, without offering an overt challenge to the account of postwar French cinema popularized by Truffaut, nevertheless subverts it very effectively, particularly by refusing to see the 1950s as in any way dull or dishonest. This approach would have been strengthened by more sympathetic account of *série noire* films, a genre which not only encompasses a fascinating corpus but also served as a crucial vehicle for the articulation of the French industry's difficult relationship with Hollywood. Nevertheless, Siclier has written excellent chapters on the documentary tradition, particularly on Daquin, on *cinéma direct* and the ethnographic film, and on directors such as Clouzot, Melville and Allégret who are difficult to work into a coherent history if one accepts a Truffaut-inspired version of events. By his second volume Siclier's classifications become more problematical and he is reduced to giving one of his chapters the title '*cinéastes en tous genres*' for want of any unifying principle. But, of course, he is writing about very recent history in which the trees often inevitably obscure the wood, and he succeeds in covering ground that few others have tackled in the context of general histories. Of particular interest and importance are his account of the sex-film industry and its impact on mainstream production, his chapter on women's cinema (although one feels he is somewhat ill at ease with this subject), and comedy. This is not a work of theory, nor is it addressed primarily to the academic or student community. But it is written by an author whose immense knowledge of the corpus and sympathetic eclecticism permit and encourage the challenging of the film studies canon.

René Prédal's *Le Cinéma français depuis 1945* is an indispensable work for any serious student of postwar French cinema. Written for a series that is specifically addressed to university students, it adopts the formula first devised in the 1960s for the series of textbooks published by Armand Colin to which Prédal himself contributed a work entitled *La Société française à travers le cinéma*. The conception, though not the scope, has changed little: short chapters not necessarily linked by any continuity except the chronological, explanatory headings, suggestions for further reading. This is a work in which the reader has absolutely no excuse for being anything other than instructed, an exercise in reducing a vast field to manageable proportions and in offering pathways through uncharted and unexplored domains. In Prédal the reader will find brief accounts of the work of filmmakers who are normally only encountered by trawling through the back issues of *Cahiers du cinéma*: Jean-Claude Brisseau and Laurent Perrin, Olivier Asseyas and Bertrand Van Effenterre, Raymond Depardon, François Dupeyron and Philippe le Guay as well as a considerable number of 'new' women filmmakers, Claire Devers, Nicole Garcia, Claire Denis and many more. Other chapters discussing the vicissitudes of the film industry in France are illustrated by useful tables and charts. Viewers who have heard of little more than Besson and Beineix and, more particularly, distributors who refuse to buy French films unless they star Béatrice Dalle or Emmanuelle Béart, ought to be forced to read this work. On the other hand, Prédal's sociohistorical project inhibits any account of the aesthetics of individual films or the treatment of film history as aesthetic history, and cannot address questions of film criticism and film theory. This means that while the book serves as an excellent compendium or handbook, it cannot guide either the experienced or the inexperienced film viewer to a reading of the film within its historical context, still less take account of what might be called the cultural, critical, and theoretical hinterland. It is a work written for a generation of students who, though they are brought up on television, have little or no visual education and who have to be coaxed into taking seriously anything which requires more than a minimal effort.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Prédal is one of Alan Williams's sources for his account of the most recent years of French film history in *Republic of Images*. Yet there is an immense intellectual distance between the two works. Prédal can still be confident of a general agreement that history is a necessary foundation for any further study. Williams, working within an academic tradition which views history with suspicion, which is probably ignorant of European history (unless it be British), and where the legacy of the New Criticism is still very potent, is

forced to take time out to explain the bits of French history without which the history of French cinema would be incomprehensible: namely World War I, the Occupation and May 1968. Of these, only his account of World War I is really convincing because its effect on the cinema is disputed by no one. May 1968 is rapidly dealt with and the impression is given (p. 386) that Godard was virtually the only person in France prescient enough to have foreseen the Events. Nevertheless, Williams probably gives his readers enough to support his account of film history and he does point to the link between May 1968 and the rise of women's cinema. The case of the Occupation and the Liberation is different. There is considerable disagreement among French writers as to whether the 1940s marked a break with the past and hence how the films of that decade should be interpreted, but Williams does not engage with this debate. Similarly, too great a concentration on the treatment meted out to alleged collaborators, especially Guitry and Clouzot, prevents him addressing in any detail the question which exercised the industry in 1944 and has continued to exercise it to this day, namely competition with Hollywood. This means that subsequent re-evaluations of this period of French history, such as Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour* or Malle's *Lacombe Lucien*, are not given their full significance.

The structure of Williams's book does not, however, lend itself to the study of such movements and trends. This is partly because, as he explains on p. 138, he wishes to see French cinema as a 'republic' in which people/filmmakers can do their own thing, rather than as a 'one party state'/Hollywood (or the KGB as Godard said) in which they have to toe the party line. To the extent that this reviewer has understood the metaphor, it seems to account fairly well for the coexistence of various trends and genres at various periods of history and, in particular, to allow for the rise of auteur cinema. However, it is inoperative when it comes to how French filmmakers have viewed their own film history which in the postwar period has invariably been presented as a Franco-American battle pitching one monolithic block against another. A further reason why Williams cannot trace movements and trends is that he has adopted a 'principle of periodization' defined by 'radical change' so that filmmakers who have a career which spans more than one of his 'periods' cannot have their work considered as a totality – Renoir and Godard are cases in point. This can be confusing for the reader, and it occasionally leads to repetition, but it can also be damaging to the reputation of filmmakers.

It is, of course, a brave person who undertakes to write a book like this and it is almost inevitable that some parts will be better than others. Williams appears much more at home with

French cinema before World War II than he is with the postwar period – his grasp of history is firmer, his analysis of films more lucid and persuasive, the organization of the chapters more coherent. He is clearly out of sympathy with the Popular Front period with the result that his comments on Renoir, in particular, do less than justice to the director's talents and influence. His treatment of the 1950s is odd. He discusses the '*tradition de qualité*', but although he devotes some space to Becker and Melville, he does not look systematically at the thriller, despite recent work on the genre, and prefers to give more space to Vadim and Chabrol than to Godard and Truffaut. Louis Malle also receives exasperatingly generous treatment. After May 1968 it is clear that Williams more or less loses interest, so that this book gives little idea of the impact of the Events except in brief references to women's cinema and to some political cinema. On this evidence one might be forgiven for thinking that after 1975, or thereabouts, French cinema ceased to be of any value.

This might (with some difficulty) be defended as a critical position but as a publication strategy it is bizarre. Williams's competitor in English language histories of French cinema is Roy Armes who is, to be sure, altogether less comprehensive and well informed than Williams, but who nevertheless essentially covers much of the same ground. Williams could usefully have differentiated himself from Armes in taking a serious look at post-new wave cinema, but chooses not to do so. This, in turn, raises questions as to the corpus Williams has studied. He claims to have looked at all French films available in the USA. But what about France? We cannot seriously accept, as the basis for an academic study of any national cinema, the commercial choices of foreign distributors or the aesthetic choices of the directors of foreign archives. Anyone who, for example, relied on Britain's National Film Archive, which enjoys a good reputation in the field of French cinema, would certainly not get very far, and the US archives are far less comprehensive and more partial. But there is more. Canon formation, as practised in US university literature syllabuses, tends to rely on a process of exclusion, but at least the books are available if something or someone succeeds in changing the selection. With film, this is not necessarily the case, and with foreign films, for which subtitled copies are needed, the difficulty is compounded. It is astonishing that, in what sets out to be a serious work of scholarship, Williams has made no effort to go beyond what others have determined as canonical. Indeed, in working with a film selection essentially determined by others, he very regrettably contributes to the narrowing rather than the expansion of our knowledge. This is a perverse effect for a book that is agreeably and accessibly written and one that sets out to counter the evacuation

of history that so often surrounds the study of French cinema outside France. Ultimately, however, it is extremely important that academic film study should not degenerate into a branch of popular film reviewing where what is worth looking at is initially determined by what a commercial distributor has risked buying.

No such concerns surface in Jefferson Kline's *Intertextuality in New Wave French Cinema*, a volume whose contents fall squarely within the already canonical. He looks at a number of much viewed and criticized new wave films (*Jules et Jim*, *Les Amants*, *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, early Chabrol films, *Ma nuit chez Maud*, *Pickpocket*, *A Bout de souffle* and *Pierrot le fou*) and examines their intertextual relationship with literature. The premise is essentially postmodernist: 'Since there can be no escaping genre, since freedom is attainable only within or against genre, Godard embraces it' (page 193). Kline's readings are immensely persuasive. His book is scholarly and erudite, and his familiarity with the byways of French and American literature is impressive. Even so, in the best of the essays, which is devoted to Godard, he misses the odd trick; neglecting to point out the references to Bataille in *Pierrot*. Similarly, his exclusively Franco-American focus means that Defoe, a major intertext for Céline, and an essential component of the utopianism which he notes in relation to *Pierrot's* ironic reference to *Candide*, does not merit a mention. These often brilliant essays are part of the tradition that seeks to isolate the film text from its social and industrial history and to relate it only to selected parts of cultural history (namely literature). This is an approach which Kline sustains magnificently. It is clear, though, that a fully persuasive reading of any of these films would require other, non-literary, intertexts to be adduced and explored. Kline hints at his more general interest in comparative film history, asserting that in the new wave, 'the American desire for coherence and seamlessness will be constantly countered by an aesthetics of discontinuity and alienation' (page 225). In other words, there is a second volume to be written which seeks to place the relationship between French and US cinema in a broader political and cultural context. However, the present volume grew out of a course Kline taught at Boston University. For him to write the second would require a shift in film studies away from the atomization and close reading that, ultimately, derives from the New Criticism, towards an approach based on cultural history: an approach which would utilize books such as *Republic of Images* as much as, or more than, Kline's. There is little likelihood of this happening, if only because it requires greater effort on the part of students than they are often prepared to provide. But until it does, the difference between France and the USA will also persist in the way they write film history.

review:

Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991, 313 pp.

JOHN CORNER

'A good documentary stimulates discussion about its subject, not itself.' At a number of points in this important book Nichols returns to these quoted words of an anonymous director, critically engaging with the aesthetics of transparency which they encourage and, at the same time, recognizing the force and the integrity of that referentiality which marks 'documentary' out as a special kind of filmmaking. Though wary of the claims of a 'general theory', Nichols' aim is to resituate documentary within film studies, bringing it in from the scorned margins and providing some of the analytic categories and typologies by which its under-recognized conceptual interest can be established. For a long time, documentary study has lacked 'interest' in film and media studies largely because of what has been seen as its irredeemable and naive obsession with realist representation. What could a conceptually alert new discipline *do* with such a recidivistic area of aesthetic backwardness and ideological complicity, except occasionally stage a show trial just to keep everyone on their toes? Against the almost terminal problematization of the very idea of 'representation' coming from vanguardist antirealism and the – again, almost terminal – problematization of the very idea of 'reality' more recently issuing from postmodernist commentary, documentary looked a bit beside the point.

More than any other media scholar, Nichols has continued to argue the case for the complex textuality of documentarism and for the knowledge about the historical contingency of evidence and argument which close study of it can offer. As some of the blurb quotes on the back cover suggest, it may be that the broader intellectual climate is now much more congenial to the pursuit of this kind of inquiry.

The two foundations of documentary's distinctively referential poetics are the indexicality of the image and the 'evidentiary', rather than narrative, principle of editing. Within different recipes of documentary construction, these provide for the primacy of an expositional logic rather than a narrative one, even where a storyline is used. They also allow for a distinctive kind of continuity across space and time. It is a measure of the originality of Nichols' scholarship that he is able to push his account of these factors, in themselves widely discussed in media research and teaching, to the point where new differentiations, new connections and new questions begin to emerge. Whilst for too many people in film and media studies, the documentary image's projected indexicality (what Nichols calls its 'stickiness' in respect not only of pro-filmic events but also of the 'historical world') has been seen to require only sceptical dismissal, Nichols offers an intensive engagement with its social semiotics. Deployed variously in different subgenres of documentary work, and carrying different kinds of literalist and/or figurative meaning (for example the 'observed' particularism of action in present-tense *vérité*; the general resonance of a thematic montage), the indexical tie connects viewer to text as well as text to history in a way that cannot easily, or indeed prudently, be refused. And this despite the possibility of a highly managed if not entirely fraudulent profilmic, the artefactual character of both shot and sequence and the inevitable gap between particular appearance and general truth.

Nichols attempts to hold the history of documentary within a four-mode system – expository, observational, interactive and self-referential. This scheme, familiar enough in general character, allows him to investigate documentary as a formal system without being drawn too often into vulnerable generalizations across the whole range of documentary production. Its emphasis on the 'subgeneric' level also allows due attention to be paid to the continuing connections which documentary has with other forms, notably, of course, those of narrative fiction, though it seems to me that televisual forms such as the talk show, the commercial and the pop video have significantly influenced recent work. It is here that Nichols' focus on documentary *cinema*, with only occasional references to television, begins to show certain limitations. For instance, the 'interactive' documentary (by which

1 At points there is an overlap of approach with the work of Dai Vaughan, a working documentary editor as well as a critic, who has produced some of the most subtle and penetrating accounts of television documentary modes. See particularly his *Television Documentary Usage* (London: BFI, 1976). More recently, in *Watching Television* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1993), Tony Wilson has tried to develop a formally precise, phenomenological study of nonfiction. My own work with colleagues, John Corner, Kay Richardson and Natalie Fenton, *Nuclear Reactions* (London: John Libbey, 1990), attempts a comparative formal analysis in relation both to a specific public issue and to viewer interpretations.

Nichols indicates a variety of methods, including the interview and the in-shot, on-location presenter) has, through television, become *the* principal mode of documentary for most of the British (and, I suspect, the North American) public. At several points in the book, further attention to the modalities of image-based journalism and the kinds of popular epistemology which it both reflects and sustains would have been useful.¹ As an exclusively cinematic object (and mostly 'independent cinema' too) documentary certainly presents us with a rich variety of 'deep' texts but it is in its articulation with television systems that it is now put under the most significant kinds of discursive pressure (for instance, to have good entertainment value and to operate within the rules of impartiality) at the same time as it achieves its greatest political consequence. Another advantage of bringing in broadcasting is that it provides a useful pull against the tendency of many film theorists to be implausibly esoteric when it comes to 'alternatives'.

This said, Nichols provides us with the most theoretically suggestive account of nonfiction film we have and his observations are sure to stimulate not only specific casestudies but also more sustained address to broadcast forms. Some of his most valuable comments come in the context of his consideration of the idea that documentary is, essentially, a fiction. Though he recognizes the usefulness of such a proposition in undercutting certain kinds of documentary claim to authority and objectivity, Nichols is unhappy with the lack of discursive specificity it implies as well as the epistemological assumptions upon which it is based. A whole section of the book is headed 'A Fiction (Un)like Any Other', signalling his interest in both connection *and* differentiation here. Whilst noting how the documentary emphasis on 'exteriority' and sociality contrasts with fiction film's strongly interior projections and high degree of individuation, he provides a detailed enquiry into the way in which the psychodynamics of identification are variously put to work in documentary (albeit in attenuated and interrupted form) through alignments of gaze and mixings of direct and indirect address. On the related issue of how people 'act themselves' in documentary (a type of activity which he terms 'virtual performance') he is able to open up a finer sense of the signifiatory practices at work and the possibilities both for deceit and for revelation which follow from this pervasive if low-level element of dramatization. Here, he draws on an earlier chapter of the book in which the general character of documentary as a kind of *ethical* accounting practice is discussed, a practice creating an 'ethical space' which can be compared with the fictive, narrative space of the feature film.

The later chapters, on a range of more specific themes, vary in trenchancy. Their tendency to repeat as well as develop points

made earlier has the effect of breaking the sense of structure established in the first half. However, Nichols provides a particularly strong strand of analysis on representation of the physical body in documentary, including a very striking comparison of realisms and distances in pornographic and ethnographic film.

In Britain, television documentary is going through a period of generic innovation despite the economic threats. It has drawn on the changing imagery of cinema and advertising in the production of new symbolic densities at the same time as it has sought out new kinds of 'rawness'; for example, in the *Video Diaries* series (BBC, 1990) of do-it-yourself camcorder films. Nichols' attempt to account for the kinds of desire to know and pleasure in knowing ('epistemophilia'), which documentary stimulates and attempts to fulfil, marks a huge step forward in our capacity to engage critically with its present and to debate its future.